Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship in Journalism

Final report - Anna Leask

May 6, 2024

The generous scholarship funding enabled me to make multiple trips to Australia during 2023 to investigate and research youth offending initiatives, spanning just over a month in total.

Between April and December 2023 I travelled to urban and rural centres in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria to meet with and interview people working in the youth offending and prevention space. I also had the chance to speak to various young offenders and reformed offenders about their lives.

Government departments were generally not willing to meet so, early on in my planning, I pivoted towards focusing on the community initiatives affecting positive change.

I selected these groups and initiatives after speaking to experts about what was working - and what was not. I believe this change in direction allowed me a much deeper insight into the real issues and how they could be tackled.

The current New Zealand Government is in the process of introducing a number of new “tools” to deal with youth crime, including establishing military-style boot camps for young offenders who commit “more violent or destructive crimes”.

It will also introduce new legislation and fund community initiatives in a bid to address what has arguably become New Zealand’s most inflammatory crime and justice issue.

While we all agree steps need to be taken at Government level - what is clear is that everyone from our leaders and authorities to the wider community need to have a better understanding of the real reasons why our young people are offending.

Many people outside the youth offending/justice/support space assume these issues are cause by bored, bad or brazen children and young people.

There is a failure to recognise that the offending is perpetrated by young people suffering under a plethora of issues far too big for them to recognise or deal with themselves - poverty, mental health, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, drug use, intergenerational crime etc.

Research

In Australia, people are trying different ways to connect with and engage with youth and they are seeing real results - not just a reduction in offending but real-life changes within their young people.

Every person I spoke to reiterated that the answer to youth offending and prevention does not lie in a one-size-fits-all approach including boot camps and lock-ups.

Rather, the answers lie in each specific community - meeting these troubled children and young people where they are at and “fixing” them from the ground up.

I travelled around Australia meeting with people running groups that were working towards this and discussing exactly what they were doing, how they were doing it what their results were.

I was able to speak with people working on the front line in urban and rural locations, people working with various demographics of young people including First Nations, Pacific Island and Maori.

I spent time out on the road with police and youth justice staff visiting young people on their radar - both offenders and those at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

I spent several days working alongside young people engaged with a rural initiative that has all but cut youth offending in the area. This initiative runs various employment operations for the young people including a food truck and fencing and I was able to get alongside them and hear their stories first-hand.

I interviewed the head of the Youth Crime Task Force in Queensland - a state experiencing significant levels of high-harm youth crime. I was able to speak to him about his work, what his teams are doing and how other jurisdictions and countries could emulate the process.

I also sat down with two prominent judges in New South Wales - the head of the NSW Children's Court Judge Nell Skinner (who is not named in the final work, a condition of our interview) and Magistrate Sue Duncombe who sits in th Youth Koori Court, established in response to the significant over-representation of Indigenous young people in the criminal justice system.

A pilot commenced in 2015 at Parramatta Children's Court and following its success government funding was provided to expand the Youth Koori Court to Surry Hills in 2019 and Dubbo in March 2023.

As you may be aware, sitting judges in New Zealand rarely - if ever - grant interviews to journalists so to speak to these women was a hugely helpful and very powerful experience. Both agree that understanding what youth offenders have lacked in their lives and filling those gaps has to be the first step - and simply putting them in a cell is not doing them or the community any good.

I had previously been told about the work of these judges in transforming the way youths were dealt with in court by a number of people on the front line - both in official and at a community level. I was extremely grateful that when I reached out to them about my research project they agreed to meet with me.

In December I travelled to Melbourne to attend the 2023 Australia and New Zealand Society of Criminology conference.

Spanning three very full days, the conference theme was "Contesting Boundaries & Meeting Future Challenges".

I attended 18 presentations (including some symposiums where three or more people spoke individually on interconnected topics) specifically on youth offending and interventions.

I also attended a number of other presentations that were less directly relevant but still helpful as they touched on domestic violence, policing, incarceration and indigenous issues which are all connected to the youth space.

The youth justice-specific presentations I attended were:

● First Nations victim-survivors of gender-based violence: Interrogating justice responses

● Early intervention youth case management and diversion program evaluation

● Deterring Drivers: An initiative to reduce car theft and joyriding by young people

● Youth offending during an exceptional event: A developmental view of the COVID-19 pandemic

● Pathways from Acculturation to Juvenile Delinquency: Considering the mediating effect of discrimination and delinquent peers

● Teaching ‘inside the wire’ in an Aotearoa New Zealand prison: Outlining a pilot and exploring future initiatives.

● A 'chicken or egg' question: What happens first - social exclusion or criminalisation?

● Fostering inclusion in carceral higher education in NZ

● Grievance and intra-familial homicide in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

● Family Violence and Sexual Harm: Experiences of victorian victim survivors and sector practitioners
● The overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples and women in the WA justice system

● Communities countering crime: The promise and peril of place-based crime prevention

● Are courts Converting to Diverting? A statistical analysis of a court diversion program in Victoria

● Contemporary challenges for young people seeking bail

● The challenges of support provision and access to justice for criminalised girls and women

● Symposium: Community-based prevention to divert children from the criminal justice system: Need, evidence and opportunities.

- ➢ During this session,, we heard from The Pathways to Prevention Project focussed on giving preschool children an “enriched program to improve basic language and communication skills that children need to function effectively at school and in social interactions”. The result of this programme so far is that of the preschoolers involved, youth justice contact was 50 per cent lower.
- ➢ And we heard from academics looking at reducing the flow of young children into the justice system. They spoke of how when young children commit serious crimes, their outraged community demanded authorities ‘get tough.’ These children are victims of multiple disadvantages and are overwhelmingly Indigenous, making youth crime crackdowns racist, the researchers argued.

●Keynote speaker: Nothing about us without us- embedding lived experience in justice

● Symposium: Improving the lives of vulnerable young people: examining the role of research-led interventions. During this session, I was able to listen to multiple speakers doing work directly relative to my research. Some of these speakers discussed:

- ➢ An intervention programme that aims to enhance self-awareness, self-regulation, and connection skills for young people who have experienced and used violence.

- How the use of violence by young women who use, and experience violence is a complex and growing issue that is under researched and often poorly understood. This presentation discussed and shares the narratives of 24 young women. Their stories indicate the prevalence and role of trauma, homelessness, structural disadvantage and intersectionality in their use and experience of violence.
- How young women leaving out-of-home care experience significant socio-economic challenges during the sudden transition to independent living.
- How adolescent domestic and family violence is one of the most complex, persistent, and damaging problems we face, and after detection, it is often poorly responded to. For justice-affected young people, being both a user and victim of violence can make these responses even more difficult.
- And how existing programs for adolescents under 18 using violence towards a parent and/or sibling in Victoria do not adequately respond to young people who use violence against an intimate partner.

Alongside my travel to Australia, I have also spent many hours reading books, papers, reports, textbooks, documents and news stories relating to youth offending and its drivers, intervention and solution suggestions.

Final findings

As mentioned in my published work a recent survey suggested 87 per cent of New Zealanders believe youth crime has reached “crisis point”.

While there has been an escalation in the level of offending - the number of children and youths aged 16 or under coming before the courts has halved over the past decade.

At any rate, action is needed to curb youth offending - but what? By whom? And how long will it take?

Australia has the same youth crime issues on a bigger scale - and I went there to look at at how everyday people are taking the issue into their own hands and making a real difference, and how authorities are stepping out of traditional boxes to try new things.

The links to my work are below.

I decided to publish pieces that highlighted specific people and specific work. Every person I spent time with in Australia had the same message, the same theme of thoughts so, rather than a hard news-angled feature, I chose to go with the more relatable, compelling and reallife examples that impacted me the most.

As mentioned earlier, video was a hard component. The young people I met could not be filmed and those who could did not want their deepest trauma and troubles documented on film.

To ensure strong video content, I worked with the NZ Herald visuals team to produce text stories, a basic but extremely strong way to tell the stories of the young people in their own words, without outing them.

I was also permitted to use supplied video which helped to illustrate the story I was telling.

Part one:
Breaking 'Bad': The kids aren't alright - how could NZ solve the youth crime 'crisis'

Part two:
Breaking 'Bad': No easy fix, no silver bullet - so what will it take to curb youth crime?

Initially both parts of Breaking 'Bad' were published in our premium section, available only to subscribers. Both pieces of work will be made free to all readers by the end of May, within three weeks of publication.

The decision to publish this way was to maximise engagement with the work. I can share with the Board that premium pieces remain on the nzherald.co.nz home page for much, much longer and are much more prominent. Free content turns over constantly and we wanted to make sure this work stayed front and centre for as long as possible.

Also, our analytics show that our subscribers engage almost eight times more than our free audience - this means they are reading and taking in more content.

We definitely want this for two pieces of work sitting at just under 9000 words each - rare for any news agency to publish!

Alongside the two digital features, there will be a number of compressed pieces in the print edition of the NZ Herald. I can provide PDF versions of these if needed, but they are shorter versions of the work above.

I also discussed my scholarship work on our **daily podcast The Front Page.**

My findings are very clear within the content.

Youth offending is a symptom of much bigger social issues.

No child is born ‘bad’.

No child wants to be a criminal, to be locked up, to be living a dangerous and unstable life.

Whilst it cannot be ignored that the top cohort of offenders in any community are, particularly as they get older, making choices to commit crimes.

They are causing damage and putting community safety at risk and there has to be a custodial option as a consequence for their behaviour.

But I firmly believe that every young offender’s pathway to criminality begins with simply trying to survive. Many just do not have the options to live different lives or the capacity or learned knowledge to change their lives or behaviour.

These young people don’t want to be out stealing cars and burgling houses at night - they want full tummies, clean clothes, warm beds, safe houses and sleep.

However they are being failed by the adults in their lives - both the parents and caregivers who are supposed to provide the basics and their wider community from health and education to extended family and neighbours.

These kids don’t get to choose what life they are born into. They don’t get a say. They don’t know how to ask for help. They think their life is normal. They only know what they know.

Many are dealing with parents who have serious mental health or addiction issues. They have health and mental health issues themselves.

They are living under clouds of poverty, neglect, family violence, and sexual and other abuse.

They are disengaged from school, they are bored, they are unsupervised. They are hungry, tired and stressed.

They are kids. And most people forget that - and have no idea of the incredibly awful circumstances these kids live with every day.

In many cases, they are doing what they know, what they've seen growing up, what is normal to them. They are just living the life they are in.

Sadly, these children and young people are the face of the youth crime epidemic - thieves with no care or respect who are deviant, reckless, dangerous and simply not as good as other kids.

While the top cohort of youth offenders certainly need to feel the full force of the law, the majority are just kids with no idea what they are doing. No hope, no worth, no idea.

Everyone is calling for action, sick of the ram raids, car thefts, high-speed joyriding - the damage this anti-social behaviour causes to the community.

The hard truth is - there is no immediate fix to this. There is no silver bullet.

But there is a way forward, and it's going to take every single one of us to make it happen.

Early intervention. A better understanding of what youth crime actually is - who is behind it and why.

A shift in the community's mindset.

We all jump up and down about family violence, child abuse, the worst neglect cases we read about in the news. We cry foul over the likes of the Kahui twins, little Moko and Malachi, Nia Glassie - and back further to James Whakaruru, Delcelia Witika and Lillybing.

We are appalled by the men who beat, torture and kill their wives - often in front of their kids.

And the kids offending today - most are living in the same kind of home environment. Being abused and seeing abuse. Knowing onlu violence, crime and struggle.

So where exactly do we think the little people at the centre of those situations end up?

They are, by and large, our current cohort of youth offenders. Broken and damaged little people who need help - have needed help since they were born in most cases - and have no one to lead the way, no intervention.

I did not go into this project with a view to highlighting what New Zealand is doing wrong or failing at. I simply wanted to see what was being done in communities like our own - rural, urban, ethnic - that worked and what real people were doing with real kids rather than talking heads spouting stats, ideas, preprepared dialogue and policy that does not match with the reality of the frontline.

Around the world, extensive research shows that early identification and intervention are vital to steer children onto a more positive path.

And intervention is exactly what the New Zealand Government has promised.

National’s youth crime policy outlines a “crackdown” on youth crime including military-style academies with a “rehabilitative and trauma-informed care approach”, legislative changes and funding to “empower community groups to break the cycle of offending”.

Naturally, it will be some time before we see what if any difference these changes make.

But the merits of ground-level, community initiatives run by everyday people directly targeting the most high-risk and at-risk youth offenders is already patently clear in Australia.

I hope that this work I have done helps to open people’s eyes and minds to youth offending - which is not a case of ‘bad’ kids being ‘bad’.

As every person I spoke to said, in their own way, there is no such thing as a ‘bad’ kid - but there are bad situations.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely appreciative and thankful for the learning and research opportunities that the Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship in journalism has afforded me.

I have had access to people doing work unheard of in New Zealand and people who have a lot to teach officials and the community about how we need to think about youth offending and respond to it.

I would like to thank the donor of this scholarship for the opportunity. I appreciated I am the first graduate to receive this scholarship under new parameters where I could use the funds to travel and research a journalism project. I feel very privileged to be selected and able to carry out work I feel is extremely important.

Thanks also to the Journalism Advisory Board, particularly Tara Ross for my selection and ongoing support.

I am passionate about journalism and storytelling and being awarded this scholarship has enabled me to explore a subject and space I have a huge interest in - and one that is also extremely relevant in current New Zealand society.

It was also an honour to be the first journalist granted the scholarship for a crime and justice project.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to cover this topic and present my findings to our audience - and in time, journalism students.

The research and travel were challenging as the work was completed outside my daily work commitments which included Monday to Friday coverage of two unprecedented and high-profile court trials spanning about five months in total.

Both the Mama Hooch bar stupefying and sexual assaults case and the prosecution of Lauren Dickason for the murders of her three children in Timaru were highly demanding and intense and I carried out the scholarship work on top of this.

Despite the challenge though, I worked hard to ensure the scholarship work thorough and robust.

I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing support and guidance of Dr Helen Farley, Associate Professor in Criminal Justice and President of the Australasian Corrections Education Association.

Dr Farley has given hours of her time and steered me in countless helpful directions - to research, information and people on the ground working in the youth offending space in Australia who in turn assisted the planning of my research.

Interviews and visits

For the board's information, interviews and visits I completed in 2023 included:

NEW SOUTH WALES

LeaderLife - Dubbo
Joh Leader, founder and CEO
Mel Singh, programme coordinator
"Uncle" Frank Doolan, Indigenous elder and community worker

BackTrack - Armidale
Bernie Shakeshaft, founder and director
Breanna Duncan, social worker
Young offenders including "Eddy" whose story was presented in video format

Down the Track - Lake Cargelligo
Lana Masterson, founder and coordinator [BY ZOOM]
Katy Quinn, youth worker
Jacob Beetson, former participant, now support worker
Maddy Bell, former youth participant, now support worker
Shynita, youth
McKenna, youth

Alison Wheeler, Lake Cargelligo teacher, DTT supporter
Professor Adam Kerezy, Lake Cargelligo local, DTT supporter
Peter Skipworth, Lake Cargelligo local, DTT supporter

Justice Reform Initiative - Sydney
Robert Tickner, chair (ex-Minister for Aboriginal, TSI Affairs)
Mindi Sotiri, executive director

PCYC (Police & Community Youth Clubs) - Sydney
Sen Sgt Danny Eid, NSW Police Youth Command at PCYC Paramatta
Jojo Lee-Tau, manager at PCYC Blacktown
Tom Vakai, youth worker at PCYC Blacktwon
Rodney Williams, head boxing coach, mentor at PCYC Blacktown
Terrence Harris, youth at PCYC Blacktown
Yillilung Gordon, manager at PCYC Sydney South

New South Wales Judiciary - Sydney
Magistrate Nell Skinner, NSW Children's Court President (anonymised in content)
Magistrate Sue Duncombe NSW Koori Court head (for Indigenous youths)
Youth Justice staffer at NSW Children's Court

QUEENSLAND

Resolve Youth - Logan
Daniel Brookes, manager
Vicky Allen, programmes manager
*Also presented at the ANZSOC conference in December

Emerge Youth - Toowoomba
Jen Shaw, founder
Caitlyn, youth worker
Chelsea, young offender, 14 (story presented in video format as "Abbie)
Grace, young offender, 17 (pseudonym "Crystal" in content")
Danielle, young offender, 17

Queensland Police – Ipswich ride along
Sergeant Kristen Thomas, co-response QPS team leader
Brooke Sanders, co-response Youth Justice team leader

Ipswich Senior Constable Simon Bernard QPS co-response team member
Charmaine Cleary Mum of troubled youth “Johnny” (story presented as video)

Queensland Police – Youth Crime Task Force
Assistant Commissioner George Marchesini Head of QPS Youth Crime Task Force

The opportunity to expand my knowledge, skills and expert contacts and to shine a very different light on a significant issue in our community and country is very much appreciated.

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Breaking 'Bad': How could New Zealand curb its youth crime crisis?

PREMIUM

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44 minutes to read

By **Anna Leask**
Senior Journalist - crime and justice

VIEW PROFILE

A recent survey suggested 87 per cent of New Zealanders believe youth crime has reached "crisis point".

Ram raids, robberies, car thefts, high-speed joyriding and brazen shoplifting incidents have dominated the headlines, sparking outrage and safety fears. But the stats don't match the perception and in fact, the number of children and youths aged 16 or under coming before the courts has halved over the past decade.

At any rate, action is needed to curb youth offending - but what? By whom? And how long will it take?

Senior journalist Anna Leask travelled to Australia - which has the same youth crime issues on a bigger scale - to look at how everyday people are taking the issue into their own hands and making a real difference.

Read her full report below.

The boy is barely a teenager but he's been on the police radar for several years already.

They've managed to get him involved in a community youth group - idle hands are the devil's plaything, and exceptionally so with young offenders and rascals.

He's doing well. They're setting him up with life skills, everyday essentials, a safe place.

His offending has tapered, but then he steals a phone from the community centre.

Incredulous but calm, the youth workers sit him down for a chat.

“Mate, we gave you a phone, a sim card, made sure you had credit - what on earth made you take this one?”

The youth hangs his head, takes a beat.

“My phone doesn’t have a torch,” he says sheepishly.

“They’ve cut the power at home again, mum hasn’t got any money to pay the bill … I had to do my homework and that phone had a torch…”

Stealing is a crime. The kid is an offender.

Like so many others - there is rhyme and reason to his choices. He is just trying to survive. He wants to be better but the adults in his life are failing him. He doesn’t want to live in a dark, cold house.

But he doesn’t get a say in that. He’s just a child. So he does what he can to get by.

To most people, kids like him are the face of the youth crime epidemic - thieves with no care or respect who are deviant, reckless, dangerous and simply not as good as other kids.

While the top cohort of youth offenders certainly need to feel the full force of the law, the majority are just kids with no idea what they are doing. No hope, no worth, no idea.

They are offenders, but they are increasingly lost, neglected, abused, unstable, unskilled children just surviving each day the only way they know how - the only way they have been taught and shown.

Everyone is calling for action, sick of the ram raids, car thefts, high-speed joyriding - the damage this anti-social behaviour causes to the community.

Blame is apportioned to the police, the Government and its agencies, schools, parents, drugs, vaping, social media, video games and former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern herself.

The hard truth is - there is no immediate fix to this. There is no silver bullet.

The offenders cannot change because the rest of society demands it.

There is no one law change, punishment, bootcamp, cash injection that can “cure” youth offending.

But there is a way forward, and it’s going to take every single one of us to make it happen.

Youth offending in New Zealand - what we know

For the past year, reports of brazen violent and anti-social offending by young people have been in the news almost daily.

Authorities acknowledge there has been a spike in crime, but there is ongoing debate over exactly what is causing it and whether it is just a blip - attributable to post-Covid complications - or part of a longer-term trend.

On a standard Tuesday in the Youth Court at Christchurch, 32 youths appeared before a judge.

They were facing a raft of charges from minor shoplifting to brutal physical and sexual assaults.

Stats provided to the *Herald* last month confirm that 80 per cent of ram raids involve young people and that they make up 16 per cent of offenders held to account for retail crime.

Stats also reveal:

- An estimated one in 20 New Zealand children are known to police for offending before reaching 14 years of age.
- Boys are twice as likely as girls to offend as children.
- Māori children are approximately three times more likely than non-Māori to become known to police as an offender by age 14.

Extensive research shows that early identification and intervention are vital to steer the children onto a more positive path.

And intervention is exactly what the new Government has promised.

National's youth crime policy outlines a "crackdown" on youth crime - by "creating more tools to respond to the most serious and persistent young offenders".

Those tools include military-style academies with a "rehabilitative and trauma-informed care approach" to help the top cohort of young offenders "turn their lives around and reduce their risk of reoffending".

The first pilot is scheduled to be operational by mid-2024.

Legislative changes are also being "worked through" that will enable "stronger consequences" for young offenders, including a new Young Serious Offender (YSO) category, "targeting the ringleaders of crimes".

The YSO applies to offenders aged 10 to 17 who have committed a serious offence - ram raids, aggravated burglary, serious assault - at least twice.

Consequences include being sent to a military academy, electronic monitoring, or being subject to an intensive supervision order in their community.

Supervision orders mean consequences for actions while the young offenders remain connected to their families and support networks.

The Government has promised funding to “empower community groups to break the cycle of offending” by providing funding.

Police will also be given greater powers to “tackle” gangs, believed to be driving much of the current youth offending with youths “stealing to order and committing ram-raids as a form of gang initiation”.

Naturally, it will be some time before we see what if any difference these changes make.

But the merits of ground-level, community initiatives run by everyday people directly targeting the most high-risk and at-risk youth offenders is already patently clear in Australia.

Little people with big people problems

Joh Leader gave up her full-time job as a paediatric speech pathologist in New South Wales to throw all of her energy at “finding community solutions for kids instead of jail terms”.

She was sick of seeing kids miss out, struggle and end up on the wrong path and she wanted to do more.

Kids were missing important appointments because their parents could not afford to travel, they could not read or understand information sent to them, weren’t present or, because of drugs of health issues, weren’t able to engage.

Leader was increasingly worried about the situation and one day had a revelation that would change her life.

“I knew we had to take the services *to* the people,” she said.

Leader launched a programme to help kids in kindergarten and year one (four and five-year-olds) who weren’t meeting literacy levels.

A number of specialists including speech and occupational therapists went to see the kids at school, court, at the methadone clinic if that's where they were with their parents.

"Wherever it was we would just take it to the kids and make sure their ears were clear, they were eating good food, having dental check-ups," said Leader.

"We got 93 per cent of those kids within normal limits in six months, and they were doing it pretty tough. After 12 months of doing that, we thought, 'If we can do that 40 kids, why can't we do that with way more kids?'"

In 2011 LeaderLife was born, an organisation with a "very simple mission of helping kids live their best life".

Initially funded by the state, LeaderLife now operates mostly from grants and donations which they pour into all of the services their youngsters need from physical and mental health to legal and everything in between.

They now operate from a suburban house - a combination HQ and drop-in hub, where their "little people" can come for whatever they need - advice, mentoring, food or just a chat and a hug.

They host programmes on-site starting with helping the 5-12 age group develop social and emotional intelligence, awareness and confidence; another for young males aged 13-18 who are at risk of disengaging from education and have had emerging contact with the criminal justice system; one that offers a "safe space" to foster and facilitate connection to services and support.

And recently they invested in a lime farm, giving the older kids a place to learn skills, work and give back to Dubbo.

"Sometimes a cup of tea and a yarn is the best support," said Leader.

"If people really, really knew what these kids are going through - I'm talking serious domestic violence, neglect, total disconnect from big people helping them to emotionally coach through the really ugly, hard feelings; no food, poverty ... I think if they actually understood that, there would be a different perception of why kids do what they do"

Leader said when she decided to take her work to the community she had no idea how or where to start.

She called on Bernie Shakeshaft, who runs the hugely successful BackTrack youth programme in Armidale, NSW and his advice was short and firm.

"You need to do something - think big, start small, start quickly."

“Around that time there were 12 young people in Dubbo doing 90 per cent of juvenile crime - they were literally turning the town upside down... so then it was getting all the right people around the table with the idea of trying to work out ways to keep them out of juvenile detention,” said Leader.

No child or teen is forced to be at LeaderLife, they all want to be there. And they keep coming back, even when they’re in trouble when their lives are upside down. Often they are the first call when a teen has been arrested.

How do Leader and her team do it?

“One of our biggest underlying values is ‘draw don’t chase’. It’s like wild horses running in the bush, you don’t keep running after them,” she said.

“And having good adult mentors, role models, healthy relationships.”

LeaderLife - like all BackTrack’s network - works on a model of care called the Circle of Courage, which Leader says is “one of the most researched models in this whole world around how to engage disengaged kids”.

“It encompasses four things - think of a pizza in four slices; to have any harmonious group relationship, family - whatever it is - you must get four things right,” explained Leader.

“They must have a sense of belonging - kids don’t go where they’re not wanted. They must be generous, they must be able to give back to the community and other people but also be able to receive that generosity and they must have independence - we call that ‘own your own s**t’ - having autonomy over your decision-making. And you must be learning new skills.

“You get those four things right and everything will be in beautiful balance, usually.”

Programme co-ordinator Mel Singh says turning up is crucial.

“When you make a commitment to a young person, it’s a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day commitment. You can’t be not available.

“I think it’s easy for kids to be labelled as bad. Here, we don’t believe any child’s bad, we believe that they make bad choices. And at the end of the day, the relationships will steer them back on track. The power of the relationship is huge.”

Singh is often asked to come to the police station or support youths to court – both by them and their parents. She never judges but does work with them to make them see what they have done and why.

The conversations are regularly heartbreaking. She recalls one youth who was angry he hadn’t been remanded in custody after a court appearance.

Singh asked him what was so bad about his life on the outside that he would prefer to be locked up.

His response? “Everything”.

“It can be confronting, it can be worrying. It can also be a privilege in a way that a young person trusts you enough to be there in their darkest time,” Singh said.

Success is not measured by Leader and her team by complete life turnarounds, a complete stop to offending.

It’s seeing youngsters make better choices and develop.

“They could make a tiny baby step forward, then they could make a huge, backwards leap. So, it’s just inch-by-inch,” Singh said.

She and Leader appreciated juvenile detention was necessary for extreme or dangerous offending.

But they said it simply did not work for most kids because when they got out, nothing in their outside world had changed.

“It’s like putting a kid back in the dirty bath,” Singh said.

“If a child is punished and put in jail where they’re actually safe, there’s routine, they’ve got consistent, somewhat caring people, there’s rules... and when they come back out and we keep putting them back into the same situation, we’re going to get the same thing.

“Kids that get locked up are longing for a sense of belonging.... they are lost ... don’t know who they are, where they fit in society.”

Leader said the biggest mistake authorities were making was “thinking we know what kids need”.

“It’s got to come from young people and their families around what they want. They have to have autonomy and sovereignty over where they’re heading,” she said.

Many kids that come to LeaderLife have no concept of a “normal” life. Some have never seen any adult in their life with a job; some only see their parents in prison; some have grown up where stealing to survive is just how the world works.

“When you know better, you can do better,” said Leader.

“And I think we’re so good at rewarding puppies and dogs when they’re doing the right thing with the cuddles – but I don’t know if we’re particularly good at doing that as a society for children. Because you’re always picking up on the s**t not

often do you say, ‘Oh my God, you’re being such a beautiful person, I love being in your company right now’.”

“Uncle Frank” Doolan is a big part of the LeaderLife way too. He’s a Willae Wiradjuri man of the Tubbogah people and has been living in Dubbo since the 1980s.

He’s worked in the community for decades and Leader says he has “an incredible knowledge and wisdom around what works best for kids”.

His approach is simple: kids just need somebody to listen.

“The kids are out of control ... social media and the competitive nature of kids is part of the causation, but it’s not the only reason kids are doing what they are doing ... it has got a lot to do with trauma and inter-generational trauma,” he said.

“If you rearrange the letters in the word ‘listen’ it spells ‘silent’, and I’ve learnt over time that is often is the best way.

“And the reality of the world at the moment is... I see people buying pet food and I know they don’t have any pets, that’s the price of living right now. So if we’re all under pressure - how much pressure are the kids under?”

Doolan said before LeaderLife there were a good 35-50 incidents a day in Dubbo involving youths. His work then felt like “a finger in the dyke”.

He said Leader introduced a “circuit breaker” into the community - a new way of seeing and doing things.

“Punishment on top of punishment, it’s no good ... All it means is the most traumatised kids from the most traumatised place provide cannon fodder for prisons,” he said.

“There is a huge disconnect between young people and us. We’ve created an environment where they feel it’s us and them - we fail to engage them and even if we do it’s to get them to do what we want them to do. What Joh and Mel do here... there’s a bit of light at the end of the tunnel here - rather than the light from an oncoming locomotive.”

Doolan said every person in a community was part of the solution, each had a responsibility to make sure no child was left behind.

“You’ve got to do stuff that lets people know and feel they are valued. If kids feel like they’re welcome, and feel like they’re loved - you’re going to get a different result,” he said.

“And there should be a possibility of redemption... not just jail, where they just come out with issues on top of issues.”

Doolan said it was impossible to get it right with every kid - but every kid deserved the effort.

“You need a bit of humanity - kids don’t want to be bad, and I find that what kids really want is affirmation. If you have a dog and every time he does something wrong you give him a kicking or flog him with a stick, he’s going to break the chain and go for your throat.

“I know from my own experience that what you need to do is have empathy … your pain is my pain. And if you can have that they can feel that. If the young person feels it … there’s a wonderful strength and power in connection.”

Keep them out of jail, whatever it takes

Bernie Shakeshaft refuses most government funding for his organisation, BackTrack.

If he takes the money, he can’t do things 100 per cent his own way - which is a way that works, and has done for dozens of youths since 2006.

The key to his success is permanency, being a full-time omnipresent and stable figure in troubled kids’ lives. Not just putting them through a course and sending them off on their way.

BackTrack was established after Shakeshaft had enough of seeing local kids fall through the cracks of “a system that couldn’t meet their complex needs”.

These youths were trapped in a cycle of homelessness, substance use, psychological distress, juvenile crime, disengagement from school, and unemployment.

They were turning the town upside down and Shakeshaft, with almost 30 years’ experience in social work, decided to “do something”.

That is the key to any community making a difference to its youth crime issues, he says.

“Every community is different. I don’t think there’s any one single answer – but ‘do something’ is a good one, that would be a common denominator. And do it because you care. If you’re not passionate about it, then it’s probably not going to work,” he said.

Shakeshaft started small with volunteers and a shed where he gathered together his first cohort of troubled kids and his working dogs. The former stockman’s idea

was to match the at-risk teens with puppies to train - teaching a sense of responsibility, purpose and empathy.

They went on to compete in dog shows, which kept them busy and out of trouble but also helped them develop healthy relationships and basic life skills most had never had a home.

BackTrack has grown since then, as has a network of similar organisations across NSW and Queensland.

Shakeshaft said there was one solid reason BackTrack worked.

“You cannot get kicked out of BackTrack, full stop,” said Shakeshaft.

“You don’t do 12 weeks or 26 weeks or six months, then kick them out and get another group of kids? We would have been better off not starting with those kids because I think you do more damage than you do good, getting them the sense of hope and then walking away from them.

“Our mission is to keep kids alive, out of jail and to help them chase their hopes and dreams – for as long as it takes.”

The youths Shakeshaft takes on - boys and girls - are aged between 10 and their 20s.

Some of the kids live at Warrah, a property Shakeshaft owns.

At Warrah, the residents are supervised closely and have to live by the rules and under their self-imposed mission statements including “own your own s**t”.

Some of the older Backtrackers live in the stand-alone units Shakeshaft has built out the back and pay rent. All do chores. All are expected to behave, to be home on time and be respectful.

“They’re from mostly single-parent homes or living with grandmas. The majority are already disengaged from the education system. There’s a lot of couch surfers - so no stable accommodation, a lot of Indigenous kids with drug and alcohol issues, a lot with mental health issues.

“They lack a sense of belonging or connection to something and they’ve had to deal with big adult problems as young kids ... all come from some kind of traumatic background and have lack of genuine good relationships in their lives.”

Shakeshaft says every “bad” kid is fixable - with the right people. And those are rarely found in detention centres or at “clinical” state-run programmes with a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

“Why are we prepared to spend so much money on something that doesn’t work - or makes it worse? It’s back to that punishment thing - they do something wrong, lock them up, throw away the key,” he says.

“Look at what Queensland’s done, building two new juvenile detention facilities - we know that 80 per cent of kids are going to be back in there inside of 12 months.”

Some of his kids, before BackTrack, were locked up “10, 11, 12 times”. But since engaging the likelihood of that happening is “really slim”.

“Why? Because we know if we can surround you with other people who are not necessarily involved in that world .... help with accommodation, food, the drug and alcohol stuff, then the chances of staying out are much higher. "

One of Shakeshaft’s long-term BackTrack boys spoke about his experience.

“I grew up in a house full of domestic violence. Dad was in and out of jail a lot, mum wasn’t at home a lot. I never really had much as a kid ... it was pretty rough.

“I was in a lot of trouble at school - I didn’t fit in at school very well, so I was always in strife hanging with the wrong crowds.

“I came to Backtrack when I was 13 or 14, they just started to give me a little bit of guidance around things I never got taught at home. Then I did nine months in juvie.

“None of the system works at all - locking boys in cells for 12 hours a day, solitary confinement, sitting in a cell that’s dark, with no bloody blanket. That’s crazy - that doesn’t help, you can’t lock kids up like that for six months and expect them to be fine.

“The only thing that changed me was myself.”

Shakeshaft accepts there’s a place for detention when youths have been convicted of serious offending. But even then he feels it does little to address their issues or help them develop.

And expecting young offenders to change their ways simply because they’re sent to do a lag, to Shakeshaft, is a ridiculous notion.

“Lock them up, that’ll teach them. Teach them what? They all come out better criminals,” he said.

“Imagine if we tried to get you to change - to walk into your boss’ office and tell them to get f**ked, to go in when you want, to steal the company car or take the tyres off, when you go to court roll in your thongs and tell the magistrate he’s got no idea what he’s f**king talking about, steal whatever you had to steal to get by.

“It would be a friggin difficult job, right? It’s just as difficult to get these kids to change – because it’s not what they’ve grown up with, and we only know what we know.

“How do you change that? Inch by inch. You’ve just got to hang in for the long haul.”

Shakeshaft is hands-on with his team and the kids every day, every night. He goes with them to court when needed. He agrees to have them at his property when they’re released on bail.

He’s all in for these kids. Always.

The day before his interview for this report he’d been woken at 6am by one of his older boys - who now works for him - drunk out of his mind and distressed.

“Then I had to spend half a day with him, while he sobers up and goes through the tears,” he said.

“This morning I get a text message from him apologising - and I said, ‘You don’t need to apologise mate, that’s what we’re here for. And how lucky am I that you trust me enough to come out here in that state, get me out of bed at 6am on a Saturday?’

“You’ve got to take it back to your own life - who were the big people that you looked up to? If you have good big people that you look up to, that you idolise, then you’ll copy. And that’s what we do here - put big people around them.”

There are a few simple mantras the BackTrack kids have to adhere to - simple, but memorable, effective:

“You f**k it, you fix it.”

“Leave your s**t at the gate.”

And it’s clearly getting through.

“We’ve got the lowest juvenile crime stats in this town, anywhere in any local government areas in New South Wales. It’s pretty crazy,” Shakeshaft said.

BackTrack has a huge community buy-in because of the results.

People see the change and appreciate the work being done. They’re quick to hire BackTrack kids who have trained as welders, mechanics, delivery drivers.

“It’s not impossible, but it takes time and you got to have the patience for it,” said Shakeshaft.

“What is success to us? The kid’s alive. The kid’s got a job, they have a dream and they’re working towards that. And some of those dreams may take a lot more time.

“These kids need some hope. And then it’s just about keeping putting opportunities in front of them over and over and over. And somehow it works.”

The first seven BackTrack boys, known by Shakeshaft as “the Magnificent Seven”, are a good indicator of how the programme can work.

Of the group, six have jobs, most have families, one owns his own home, another owns a business.

“And they were wild men, they were seven red hots,” Shakeshaft explains.

“They just drop back in whenever it suits … one was in hospital because his f**king liver’s given up from trying to drink his pain away and he had nowhere else to go, we let him back in.

“Cos you can’t get kicked out of BackTrack. You can choose not to be here, but you can never get kicked out.”

Where the wild kids were

Lexi’s a slight, quiet girl who hides behind her silken dark hair. She is weary of everyone, warm only to those who have proven that she can trust them.

She’s 16 but you can tell her experience of the world is much older.

Her parents are heavy drug users. Separated.

By 13 she’d moved out to live with her boyfriend. There was domestic violence with him but where else could she go?

Lexi bounces from house to house, but spends a lot of time at her “dad’s baby mama’s place”. There’s not much room with five younger half-siblings, whom she always ends up looking after because their mother just doesn’t get out of bed. She hates leaving the little ones alone.

Her school attendance rate in 2023 was 2 per cent - just four of the 200 days she was expected to be there.

It’s no surprise when she’s either babysitting or exhausted and starving after being up all night because she has nowhere to go.

She’s just one of the kids in Lake Cargelligo, rural NSW, who would be “doing drugs or dead” without Down The Track (DTT).

DTT was started by Lana Masterson in 2016, focusing on disengaged and marginalised young people aged 10-20 in the remote communities of Lake Cargelligo and Murrin Bridge, an Aboriginal community.

Masterson moved there from Sydney a year earlier with her police officer partner and was stunned at the level of youth offending, which was in her words “through the roof”.

Her partner was doing massive overtime hours driving kids to and from youth custody in Wagga - almost three hours each way after she’d finished her normal duties.

“There were massive amounts of juvenile lock-ups, just ridiculous for the size of our town. The community was unsettled, people were just talking about how bad the issue was - but no one was actually doing anything,” Masterson said.

“I came from a very sketchy background ... lots of drugs, lots of getting in trouble with police ... so I felt like I had a lot to offer. I could see myself in a lot of the kids that were getting in trouble.”

Masterson said the support of her grandparents helped her to change her path and she felt like Lake Cargelligo was her chance to give back.

“Whatever they were doing just wasn’t working ... I went to my partner, and I said ‘who are the five wildest kids in Lake Cargelligo? Give me their names and addresses and I’m gonna go have a yarn,” she said. “I got in the truck, went around, knocked on the door and introduced myself, and said, ‘how about we go and do something’?”

Masterson learned quickly what was driving the terrible behaviour - boredom, poverty, truancy, absent and or neglectful parents, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, learning difficulties, disengagement.

So she got them all together again and took them out fencing.

And as they worked, learned, and occupied their usually idle hands, Masterson did what no one else had ever done for the kids - she listened.

Rounding them all up and taking them to work soon became a daily thing.

Sometimes the victims of their offending came along and worked alongside the kids - giving them insight into the impact the crimes had in a space the youngsters felt safe, where they could really hear and understand.

Alongside fencing, shearing and mustering opportunities followed.

“Within six months all five had full-time work and didn’t get locked up from that point. So that’s when I knew that I was on a bit of a good thing. It worked, what I

did and it kind of just grew from there.”

Masterson, inspired by what Shakeshaft had done, established DTT.

Alongside the mentorship, practical education, training, and wellbeing support she created employment for the youths in the form of a food truck and event catering - things that also help them to give back to the community.

The DTT team also collects hundreds of kilos of native seeds for local replanting projects and jumped in to help locals anywhere they could when flooding ravaged the area.

Some youths attend DTT full-time instead of school, others are part-time. All get the chance to learn new skills and obtain licences, trade certificates.

The kids are not easy - their lives are unstable in ways most of us cannot imagine. But Masterson and her team are committed to getting up each day and doing what they can.

“Our mission is to keep kids alive, out of jail and thriving. We want to help them achieve their hopes and dreams ... with no young person left behind,” she said.

“I live and breathe this. The last thing I think about before I go to bed is, are these young people okay? Who’s had a feed tonight? Who’s got warm blankets? Who’s up waiting for other people to go to bed, before it is safe for them to go to bed?

“When I wake in the morning, it’s who’s had breakfast? Who’s going to school today? People think it is just a youth programme, it is so much more than that ... This is not just a job. For some of these kids, this is life and death.”

Katy Quinn is a Lake Cargelligo local and has worked for DTT since the early days.

“Sticking to rules and teachings that are not relevant just doesn’t work in this age - we need to do things different,” she said.

“There are kids in our cohort that, if we weren’t there - they’d be in some pretty deep s**t.

“If you push them, they don’t come back ... if you work at their pace, letting them have control of their own decisions, it makes them stay ... at the end of the day - it’s about them isn’t it?”

Quinn said the key to helping is getting to know them and their story – finding out what is behind their actions rather than pushing them into “one-size-fits-all” punishments and programmes.

“Some don’t know what jobs are and how to have them, they haven’t seen parents – and sometimes grandparents - with jobs or licences so don’t know what adulting

looks like," she explained.

"They only know what they know ... we have a 7-year-old at the moment who we're working with, his older brother is already engaging so it's a case of looking at early intervention.

"Around 80 per cent of our kids have gone into jobs ... it's pretty amazing what they've done - it gives the other kids hope."

Masterson said the proof DTT works better than traditional methods for wrangling young offenders was in the stats.

"There is less offending, and the level of offending is a lot less as well - it's not as aggressive or violent as it was," she said.

"Probably one of my favourite things to see is that change in the community – when a kid does get employment and it has a bit of a knock-on effect, and it actually motivates or inspires somebody else in the family to go, 'Oh, they're doing all right, I'm going to have a go at that'.

"For us, it's about creating as many new experiences and opportunities as possible and putting them in front of the kids and saying 'take it or leave it, but it's there if you want to try it'. That seems to really work well for us.

"You literally don't know what you don't know. So it's up to us to find those opportunities and keep presenting them."

Masterson said back in 2015, the community was "very, very different".

She is proud of the work she and the DTT team have done so far.

"If I'd have had something like this when I was growing up, I wouldn't have done all the drugs, I wouldn't have been in all the trouble, because I would have had somewhere that I felt like I belonged.

"If a kid feels like they're valued, and they're being heard and respected - it changes things for them. So just give them a shot, show some belief."

She acknowledged it wasn't all smooth sailing though - no kid's journey was linear or easy.

"We're working with some pretty wild kids and although you might see moments of progression, you're gonna have moments of kick-back as well," she said.

"I don't think there's a bad kid - that's not a thing. I think sometimes as a community we drop the ball and maybe we don't offer enough inclusion and opportunity. And that's when kids fall off the wagon."

It took a while for Lake Cargelligo locals to trust in DTT's work and mission. Now, the results and benefits are clear and the community buy-in is strong.

"It's not a silver bullet, it's not going to work for everyone - but it's the best we've got. There's nothing else," said fish biologist Professor Adam Kerezy, who lets DTT use his land for its camps and other activities, and works personally with the kids.

"We're not there yet, but at least we've got a positive programme that we can help with - which is important to us, something we can help with long term. We're happy to help."

His partner Alison Wheeler – a teacher – added: "The problem is every other programme is so short-term ... we need 20 years at least to change anything. We need the same programmes, the same people. You've got to keep showing up and treating them the same way."

Peter Skipworth's family has farmed at Lake Cargelligo for a century and is a big part of the community. He is passionate about supporting DTT and getting involved however he can.

"I've lived here my whole life, and every other thing that's come along - mostly government-funded - falls off.

"Sometimes you trust them [young offenders] and it backfires – but you can't stop ... If you don't stump up, who will?"

The hardest 'normal' to break

In Toowoomba, 125km west of Brisbane, there are at least 130 young people homeless on any given night.

Many more are doing it tough - tougher than people could ever imagine.

When Jen Shaw was a teenager her mother and stepfather were addicted to drugs - her home life was "chaos".

"I was never in care ... I think I walked myself into child safety a couple of times and said 'hey, I need help, my mum's a drug addict. And they were like, 'what are we going to do with a 14-year-old'... they went 'f**k she's too hard," she said.

"I hit the streets of Toowoomba because it felt safer.

"I never went to juvie but all my mates did. I was jumping in and out of cars or stealing from the shops. I was trying drugs. Alcohol was always my thing, thank God - a lot of the kids I grew up with got stuck on heavy drugs and I reckon that's what changed the trajectory for them. I was a drinker, which isn't any better, but it was easier to overcome."

Shaw couch-surfed, slept rough, had her first child at 15. She was depressed, tried to overdose.

The next morning as she sat on a set of stairs, tired and groggy, she made a vow that eventually changed her life.

“It was probably the lowest moment of my life, I reckon … I didn’t really have any future.

“I remember making a promise that everything I’d been through was going to matter for somebody else one day,” she said.

In 2017 Shaw - now a mother of seven - set out on a mission to help as many of Toowoomba’s young people as she could.

“I’d always had this vision to do something for kids,” she said.

“For kids who had been let down, put in the “too hard” basket, slipped through the cracks and left behind, forgotten. I wanted to set up a place that they could get love, support and a chance to get back on track.”

In recent years Toowoomba recorded some of Australia’s highest rates of youth unemployment and incarceration.

In 2019 Shaw opened Emerge Cafe with a view to break the cycle by employing local kids doing it tough. Along with the job, she and her team worked with them to fulfil their own hopes and dreams.

As word began to spread other kids would come to the cafe every day asking for help - they were hungry, homeless and most just wanted connection with people who would not hurt them.

In 2023 Shaw’s mission moved into a new chapter. She purchased a house and land outside Toowoomba and opened House 360, a place where young people can live safely with supervision and support.

While Shaw can’t accommodate all the kids in need, she can help those who are most vulnerable.

The house has rules, the young tenants pay rent and do their share of the chores; and they have to be motivated to undertake appropriate employment.

Shaw has big dreams for the rest of the property - a vast vege garden, aquaponics and chickens. Not only will they harvest their own food, jobs will be created.

Abbie and Crystal (not their real names) were living at the house in mid-2023.

Crystal, 17, had dangerous and severe mental health issues.

Abbie, 14, was addicted to pure methamphetamine by the age of 12 and was just getting clean and working out her next step.

Before Emerge the girls had no one in their corner. Not a single adult.

Abbie's mother had taken off after years of being beaten and raped daily in front of her kids. Abbie's father then turned his abuse on her.

It's no wonder she got involved with the wrong crowd and started to offend. She stopped going to school and then got expelled for her behaviour.

"My sister told me I was going to end up dead or in jail for the rest of my life," she said.

"Most people think we are just ferals, we're just bad people - but they don't know our stories, they don't know what we've been through that makes us who we are and do what we do.

"It's not easy to change but with the right people in your life you can do it. It feels good to be here, I've learned that I'm worth it and to believe in myself."

Shaw runs a food truck and her kids work catering huge events. She gets them into programmes, get licences and training certificates. Her husband is a boxer and runs classes.

Just a week before Shaw was interviewed for this report one of the young people she worked with was killed.

The 18-year-old was travelling in the passenger seat of a stolen silver Holden Commodore when it veered of the road and smashed into trees.

"I knew of her for a long time, but over the last 12 months we were really close," said Shaw, the loss still raw.

"She lost her girlfriend in a car accident, exactly the same scenario and I feel like that window of time is where we lost her in terms of changing her life.

"I picked her up from jail seven days before she died and I said to her, 'Do you need me to be tough on you or do you need me to give you distance?' And she said, 'Be tough on me'.

"I didn't even get the opportunity to get to that part. She got out of jail on the Friday and on the Saturday morning she was using ice again.

"That's the hardest part ... that you don't get to have another crack at it."

Shaw's mission statement summarises her passion for helping.

“We will do whatever it takes to help as many young people as possible for however long it takes - and no matter how hard it is.”

She said while her cohort of kids were tough and hugely damaged, they were also “resilient and brilliant”.

“I meet kids who are 11 and they’re drug addicts … And their parents have their own issues - unhealed trauma, substance abuse … with these kids, even the stuff that their brain can’t remember, their body remembers and feels - from the belly to those younger years.

“You only know what you know … and that is the hardest normal to break.”

One of Shaw’s proudest achievements is Tyreece. An enlarged photo of the boy hangs in House 360, to serve as inspiration for other young people on their journey from hardship to healing.

At just 9 years old, Tyreece moved out of home.

He lived on the streets, fell in with the absolute wrong crowd, became well known to police.

“When I was about 12 I started breaking into houses, stealing cars … I always wanted to change but I just didn’t know to or when to. I just kept doubting myself,” he once told Australian current affairs show *The Project*.

Then he had a chance meeting with Shaw who asked: “What’s your story? Do you want a job?”

She taught him to “never be ashamed of where you came from” and changed his life.

He had dreams of joining the army - and bolstered by the Emerge team, that is exactly where he is now.

Shaw said most of her kids had a similar story. Family violence, fleeing home, living on the streets, addiction, crime to survive.

“Abbie never thought she would ever be good enough to get a job. She’s only 14 and had written off any possibility of working… now she is thinking about going back and finishing school, which is a huge change,” she said.

Crystal said before Emerge she had no hope, her world was dark and lonely.

“I was in and out of motels because no residence wanted me - I was very suicidal, I smashed things up, I went to hospital for self-harm all the time, I abused workers and threatened them,’ she said.

“Nobody understood my mental health.

“I made friends with some of the Emerge kids and they helped me. I feel safe here. I don’t do any of that bad stuff anymore.

“I got a job, I got my licence and I feel more independent. At the Emerge house, it feels like a family, like a real home. Now I never want to leave here.”

To “normal” people, fast-food jobs and a full day at school sound like miniscule accomplishments.

But for Shaw’s kids - they’ve had to climb treacherous mountains to even get a glimpse of such milestones.

“These kids don’t wake up and go ‘you know what, when I grow up I want to be a drug addict or a criminal’,” she said.

“These kids are battered … they’ve lost their childhood - we take them back to being kids again … It’s just about introducing a different concept to locking kids up.

“It’s hard work … but I always think back to that promise I made sitting on the set of stairs.

“At the end of the day, when a kid is having a tough time, it only takes one adult to show up for them. And at Emerge, we don’t stop.”

Change your mindset - change their lives

Everyone in the youth offender space agrees that early intervention is one of the key factors in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour.

In Queensland, a team at a trial programme called Resolve are going above and beyond to find the kids that need that intervention the most.

Resolve operates under Youth and Family Services in Logan City, part of the wider metropolitan Brisbane area.

In 2022 the Resolve programme - partnered by Griffith University and Queensland Police - was given Federal Government funding for a two-year trial.

The aim? To find and engage with young people aged 10-16 through outreach activities in places where they gather - then support and coach them one-on-one to live their best lives.

One of the outreach activities sees coaches driving around Logan's "hot spots" at night, talking to youths about why they're out, what's going on in their lives, and what they need to do better.

Youths who connect with Resolve are paired with a coach whom they meet with several times a week for three to six months of "intensive training", where they work through their personal situation, what they lack and need, their risks, barriers to getting back on track and most importantly – to help them explore and pursue their hopes and goals.

The coaches help their young match reconnect - or connect - with school, work, training and prosocial activities in the community.

Their mission is, effectively, to find the kids most at risk of crossing over to criminality then find out what's pushing them to that life, and help to point them in a better direction.

While every kid's circumstances were unique - they all wanted the same fundamental supports.

"Young people want safe places, engaging and educational activities, fun - in a non-judgemental environment," said Resolve programme manager Vicky Allen.

"We know that effective programmes have welcoming staff, they're accessible, well-resourced environments, engagement that facilitates rapport and trust - and consistency, the same adults working with them."

Allen said the outreach was having a "tangible impact" on the top cohort of youth offenders and, incredibly, most of the kids had self-referred to Resolve.

YFS client services manager Daniel Brookes said custody should never be the first option for youth offenders.

"Community safety is important - but the cycle is not going to stop unless you try and intervene early," he said.

"If we don't focus our efforts on those young people that are at risk now ... we're just going to end up building more detention centres."

Brookes said a big roadblock was community's perception of what a youth offender was, who they were.

"My conversations with people in the public, or family, etc, that have that thought process around 'just lock the kids up' - once you explain to them why the young people are in the position they are in in the first place with a lot of factors outside of their control and to what programmes like resolve can actually do to stop that stream of young people transitioning through the [detention centre] cycle.

“A lot of the time people say ‘yeah, now I can actually see what he’s doing, where he’s coming from, and how that could be effective’.”

One of the keys to Resolve’s success so far is the consistent relationship between coach and young person.

“Young people sometimes just don’t know what support that they really need - they have an idea, but maybe can’t articulate it very well,” said Allen.

“Through building the relationships with young people, so seeing them repetitively every week, and being able to get a feel for what’s going on for them, I think the coaches are quite skilled in being able to identify where they have issues … but the young person might not recognise that at the beginning.”

Brookes said people outside the youth work space did not really understand the “why” of offending and antisocial behaviour.

“It’s easy for the general public to point the finger and make assumptions, to drive past a group of young kids pulled up by the police and say ‘what have they done’ or ‘they’re so naughty’.

“A lot of these young people are looking for positive mentors or friendships or family, and they end up hanging out with the older kids because if you need to find your place or feel a part of something, you’re going to follow what you think is cool. And that’s when they get in trouble.”

Allen said changing the landscape of youth crime needed a willingness from the community to understand the issues better.

“Community has got to want to understand the underlying things and they’ve got to want to see what’s going on out there,” she said,

“It takes a village to raise a child … we can come on board and the coaches can work with the young people but we’re not always going to be there forever, so we need the community on board too giving them a helping hand.”

Brookes and Allen agree there is no easy solution.

“I don’t know if there’s a silver bullet … But definitely the gap that we’ve identified and continue to see is that early intervention isn’t given enough time, it’s not funded enough. Governments don’t invest enough in that space, because they’re too busy to find ways to prevent things like zero repeat offenders,” Brookes said.

“You’re never going to stop it if you’re not preventing it from the beginning.”

Allen said: “And usually it’s a cycle - the parents would have experienced that as well.”

“When you actually unpack it, you really do see that they are just people that need some help.”

Anna Leask is a Christchurch-based reporter who covers national crime and justice. She joined the Herald in 2008 and has worked as a journalist for 18 years. She writes, hosts and produces the award-winning podcast A Moment In Crime, released monthly on nzherald.co.nz

Breaking 'Bad': No easy fix, no silver bullet - so what will it take to curb youth crime?

PREMIUM

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By **Anna Leask**
Senior Journalist - crime and justice

VIEW PROFILE

Ram raids. Car thefts. Joy riding. Police chases. Violence.

Every day there is a new example of serious youth offending in New Zealand.

Off the back of that, it's only natural to assume youth offending is increasing - and dramatically. But recent stats show the opposite is true - and in fact, youth offending has been decreasing year-on-year for some time.

What is increasing, is the level and frequency of offending for the top cohort of young offenders. They're going bigger, and they're doing more.

Their crimes are much more visible - in part a result of social media and mainstream media coverage. Just this week Police Minister Mark Mitchell revealed children as young as 9 had been involved in a recent spate "swarming aggravated robberies" at Auckland jewellery stores.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon responded saying "I'm sick of it, the public are sick of it. Kiwis deserve to feel safe". He promised, again, that his Government's plan to restore law and order was moving as fast as possible - but it would take time to make a dent in the problem.

But what else can New Zealand do to address youth crime? How do we protect the community? Is there a simple "fix" to this significant social issue? Authorities here are looking at a raft of ways to respond to what they're seeing, but is it the right path to follow and will it have any impact?

Senior journalist Anna Leask travelled to Australia - experiencing almost identical youth crime issues, on a bigger scale - speaking to top cops, judges

and community workers stepping outside traditional boundaries to make a tangible difference.

This is part two of Breaking "Bad" - Can we solve New Zealand's youth crime crisis? For part one - click here.

Young people - even the most troubled - want the same things, according to people who work with them.

Routine and structure. Consistency. Safety. Security. People they can trust and rely on. A sense of belonging. Hope.

If you look at the youths who are offending, most of them lack all of the above in their lives.

They wake up every day to the unknown, to absent parents, empty fridges, cold houses, siblings that need feeding and looking after - wondering where or even if they will sleep that night.

Their offending is often about survival.

It should not be excused or minimised; there are victims and real damage and hurt caused.

But everyone working in the youth offending space will tell you these kids - and some of the offenders we are talking about are not even 9 years old - need to be better understood, to be shown a better path rather than being judged and written off.

In Queensland, the authorities are trying something a little different to address the issue.

In February 2023 the state government invested significant funds into tackling the causes of youth crime - with $100 million of that injected into "programmes proven to make a difference".

The Youth Co-Responder initiative - a joint venture between police and the Department of Youth Justice - was on that list.

Teams made up of cops and youth justice workers patrol the streets, connecting with young people who have already come into contact with the criminal justice system or are at risk of doing so.

Their mandate is to work towards the best outcomes for each child and teen. They are not there to arrest, chase, or lecture.

They are there to help, support and de-escalate.

In August 2023 Ipswich YCRT leader Brooke Sanders -whose background is in youth justice - and Senior Constable Simon Bernard begin a night shift together, allowing this reporter to join them.

They sit down and make a plan - which teens on bail they should doorknock, which other kids on their radar would benefit from a check-in, which hotspots they could drop in on, whether there's anything from the previous shift they need to look into.

The first stop of the night is delivering information about accessing housing and food parcels to a teenage girl who doesn't feel safe at home but has no idea how to get away.

She's not home, and Sanders makes a note to check in later in the week, saying ongoing contact and not giving up essential - that no kid is too hard and every is worth trying everything for.

The next stop is Johnny's place. It's a sad sight. A rundown house encircled by a rusty fence. Toys, rubbish and furniture litter the yard.

His older brother is a known offender and the YCRT is pulling out all the stops to keep 11-year-old Johnny out of the criminal justice system.

Johnny's mum comes to the door. She never invites Sanders and Bernard in, likely because her house is sparsely furnished and her fridge almost always empty.

She's a good mum, but she's got limited means and she's fighting against the world to get help for Johnny.

He's been kicked out of school again for fighting. He's wiling away his hours with older kids who he's trying to emulate, sneaking out at night.

He's a diagnosed schizophrenic and has ADHD but he's unmedicated because of a lengthy waiting list for specialist care.

It's no surprise he flips out at school.

Johnny's told Bernard before that he doesn't want to be at home because there's never any food. When he's out with his mates there's more chance he'll get a feed.

As Sanders talks to his mum about what the YCRT can do to help, Johnny shows Bernard his pole tennis skills.

The cop then takes Johnny to the boot of the car where he has packs of snacks, basic food and toiletries for kids who need it. Noodles that don't need a microwave because most don't have one at home. Muesli bars and bottled water.

Johnny grabs a snack pack and asks for a second one for a younger sibling.

Bernard realises he might also need some body wash and deodorant so gives him another bag of essentials.

“I’m just being honest mate, you look like you haven’t washed and you stink,’ he says.

“Have you been home in the last few days? Your clothes are filthy, you’ve got marks on your legs.”

Johnny shrugs it off but asks Bernard: “What’s deodorant?”.

He’s not surprised. Deodorant is hardly a priority in this home.

“Mum can’t afford food so either he misses out or he’s out with friends who are stealing food at the shopping centre,” says Bernard.

“He’s not got the chance to just be a regular kid. It’s our job to stop and talk to them and show them that we are human and that we can actually help.”

Johnny’s just one of the kids the YCRT deals with whose “normal” is like nothing most people can imagine.

Bernard spent 10 years with London’s Metropolitan Police, but says his current role is much harder.

“(Youth crime) is all about the blame game instead of accountability,” he says.

“If I want to make a difference, I have to be the change.

“The kids have got their own fight going on but as soon as they realise I am here to help them and not to oppress them and I have time for them, that’s how the trust gets built. You show them there is support and they can reach out to us - all we can do is try. It’s a slow-turning wheel... But the kids have been reaching out to us.

Night is falling in Ipswich and we head to knock on some doors.

Teen offender Max, 14, has been bailed to his mum’s place and has a 6pm curfew. He’s facing theft and violence charges.

“He can’t read or write, and people at court are giving him paperwork he can’t understand - then he breaches bail,” explains Bernard.

He’s not there - nor is mum, tasked with being at the house during curfew hours to supervise him.

But she soon arrives at breakneck pace on a bike. She confesses she actually lives up the road and Max’s bail address is his uncle’s place.

“He came home for a feed and shower and took off again four days ago,” she says, adding that a detective had been to the house looking for him earlier, meaning he’s likely offending on bail.

No one knows for sure where Max is. He might be in Ipswich. He might be at his girlfriend’s place but they don’t know that address.

His mum says he’s welcome “home” any time but if he gets caught offending on bail - again - she wants him to be locked up.

She says she doesn’t know if it will work or not, but the current arrangement hasn’t deterred him.

Max’s two older brothers are also young offenders.

“I used to offend when I was younger and I don’t want my kids to do the same... It’s so frustrating - you want them to do the right thing,” she says.

Sanders and Bernard make a note. It’s not for them to chase Max up, arrest, or charge him. They refer his breach of curfew and bail to another team to deal with.

It’s important they are not seen as the bad guys, that the kids know there are consequences if the YCRTs catch them up to no good, but that they can still trust them to look after them instead of simply banging them up in a cell til morning. Or longer.

The next two bail checks are a bust - no one’s home at the house a 14-year-old girl is meant to be and the supervisor at a youth residence reveals a young lad who is on a 24-hour curfew hasn’t been there for “ages”.

A missing person report has been filed but no one alerted the YCR team.

Sanders said bail fails were always frustrating - but there was always a bigger picture.

“But they’re not bad kids, they make bad decisions and it lands them in not-so-great situations,” she says.

“There’s no easy fix... but it’s about persistence from us, following through is the most difficult part. So many people promise the world and then don’t follow through.

“It’s about honesty, transparency and not giving up on them. If we can’t find the kids we don’t give up - we talk to their families, we work towards finding them and finding out what has happened and why.”

Sergeant Kristen Thomas is the YCRT leader for the police side and works with Sanders.

She said from July 1 until the day of the ride-along in August, the team has engaged with 364 kids.

“Many young people are anti-police, and they may have been brought up that way so we have to work out how we break down those barriers, how we get them to reach out to police when they need help, rather than shying away,” she said.

“We are already seeing relationships building, and not only with the kids, with their families too.

“And it’s not only about keeping kids safe, it’s about teaching them there’s consequences. Some kids are just not interested in doing the right thing so we are really trying to educate them on consequences and what is going to happen.

“Our team don’t arrest, we don’t investigate, we don’t caution. This is a fantastic initiative but we have to educate the community that we are not going to fix everything overnight. There is no easy fix... we just have to support young people and their families.”

Thomas said every young person was different - and needed a different approach. There was no “one-size-fits-all” way to work with them.

“It’s really hard to change the mindset but we’re trying to help in a different way... every kid has different issues, they want the help they just don’t know where to source it.

“So many kids can easily fall through the cracks... we’re not waiting for them to get to Youth Justice before we start intervening. That’s too late.”

Sanders adds:

“It’s about making it easier, letting them know we want to help... and the earlier the better - they’re on their way to the top and it’s the little thing that pushes them over. We’ve got to get them before they get to that tipping point. It’s crucial.”

YCRTs - first hitting the streets in May 2023 - now operate in 13 areas of Queensland, and last week a further $13.5 million was invested expand into two more regions.

The same day the state government confirmed the Youth Crime Taskforce would be made permanent.

Launched in August 2023, the taskforce aimed to target serious repeat juvenile offenders and provide immediate support to local communities. The YCRTs were part of the wider operation.

Queensland Police acting Assistant Commissioner George Marchesini said the taskforce would effectively focus on a cohort of 400 serious repeat youth

offenders who were “committing some really serious crime and at the worst extent resulting in death”.

Arresting our way out of this won’t work

For most of his career Marchesini has worked alongside youth, first in a child protection investigation unit and than in various roles in child safety and sexual crime.

He said his passion has always been - after protecting the community - supporting young people.

So when a youth crime task force was established in early 2023 he was a natural choice to step in as Commander.

In New Zealand, there are various teams across the 12 police districts working specifically in the youth space. But there are no large-scale taskforces like Marchesini’s, which was sparked by a horrific murder in North Brisbane.

Emma Lovell, 41, was fatally stabbed during a home invasion carried out by four teenage boys on Boxing Day 2022. Her husband was badly injured as their two teenage daughters slept nearby.

All four offenders were known to the police. Two, aged 17, were charged with murder and attempted murder.

Three days later a number of immediate changes were implemented around the way police and courts handle youth crime including:

- Increasing the maximum penalty for stealing a car from seven to 10 years
- A more severe maximum penalty of 14 years was made available for offenders committing crime at night, or where they used violence
- Amending the Youth Justice Act requiring courts to take into account previous bail history, criminal activity and track record when sentencing
- Increased penalties for criminals who have boasted about these crimes on social media
- The construction of two new youth detention centres

Marchesini’s taskforce was also born and he told the media in early 2023 he wanted “to change the story in terms of youth crime”.

He sat down for an interview for this report.

“One of the key focuses now has expanded from not just looking at our repeat offenders, but looking at the early intervention and having a focus on breaking the

cycle," he said.

"The murder.. sparked another look at our policy and we have worked very hard in that area. We're still working very hard also, in that prevention, early intervention space as well, because they're both equally important out there.

"And that's not just in those school schooling years, but even that zero to two, five and six age bracket. That first 2000 days is very important and investment in intervention is important.

"We're investing in detention centres... but the early Intervention space is where the investment really needs to be."

Marchesini said Queensland's youth crime mirrored the situation in New Zealand - vehicle thefts, burglaries and robberies, driving at high speed and fleeing police.

Home invasions were more frequent.

"We're definitely seeing a higher level of violence if they're confronted by homeowners," said Marchesini.

"And then obviously, what they're doing after the activities is sharing them on social media."

But there was another side to youth crime that was overlooked by communities impacted and damaged by the offending.

"Equally, we're starting to see families doing it really hard. Families impacted by drugs and alcohol... we've seen that having a big impact.

"When you put over the top of that the economic issues in terms of poverty, jobs, job opportunities, education - you've got almost a perfect storm brewing."

So how does Marchesini think he and his team can curb youth crime, or fix the crisis?

"That's a very difficult question. If you talk about a short, sharp response in terms of keeping the community safe, and ensuring that serious offenders are off the street, that that's a quick fix," he said.

"But actually working with families and getting community involved - that's a really important part of this.. It's actually having community involved in how we address these issues.

"How do we truly make sure they're connected, so when they're coming out of detention, they're engaged with an appropriate adult mentor - whether it's a parent, a relative, or it could be a foster carer - that truly has an active

involvement in that person's life. That's the hardest part that we need to get right and focus on.

"And what have we dropped off in the last decade that we need to refocus on? How do we maintain children in schools? How do we maintain children that aren't going to be at traditional schooling - there's alternate pathways that we probably don't invest in hard enough.

"Those things take time, and I suggest its almost a generational timeframe that we need to be looking at now."

The taskforce were dealing with kids doing terrible things - but who were also waking up each day in terrible situations.

"We're seeing children that are actually feeling safer in detention centres and in watchhouses rather than their own homes," Marchesini said.

"We're seeing that kids are out in the street because they're not wanting to be home because of what's happening - the level of violence, the level of drug and alcohol usage, not feeling safe. Those things are getting really hard to tackle."

Marchesini wanted to change the narrative around youth offenders from "they're all bad" to "what do they need".

Because, at the end of the day, they are children with underdeveloped cognitive and decision-making power, with little concept of long-term impact and consequence, with no ability to properly care for themselves - and often their siblings.

"Often, what we're hearing about as in the news is about the things that that worst cohort are doing. But it's important to remember that outside that - these are children," he said.

"These are children that aren't getting what they need from the adults in their lives out there."

Marchesini, like the others working in this space, will never minimise or excuse offending or antisocial behaviour because of age or background. But understanding the bigger picture was crucial for change.

As was understanding the different challenges faced in different communities - for example, First Nations and Australian European.

"We've been into First Nations communities and we're seeing police and other stakeholders that are actually out in the community building trust with with children - that's where it needs to sit.

“The YCRTs, that’s the first time in Queensland that we’ve had a model of corresponding agencies working alongside police outside business hours - where their core role is around engaging with children and breaking down barriers.

“In developing that trust, then we can start to sort of see what assistance they need and how they interact with their families.

“And you have to realise every community is different. You can’t have just one strategy... to have to hear the voice of the local community as to what’s needed and the investment needs to follow that.”

Marchesini said there was also meaningful work being done by community organisations.

“For example, the PCYC does amazing work. We’ve talked a lot about important it is to have that drop in session for kids outside of those school hours, so that when they’re home, they’ve been fed, they’ve had some activity.

“But more importantly, it’s building that trust with other people that can come and assist them and wrap services around them. Things like that I think are critical because it starts looking at breaking the cycle.

“Other agencies working with children are hearing that they want connection and if they’re not getting that in their family environment, that they’re getting it with their peers.

“And that’s what we’re seeing driving crime - where there’s that connection, there’s that adrenaline in terms of stealing a car with their friends. You have social media, there’s competitions on there in terms of that offending and that makes them feel wanted.

“What we need to be doing is focusing on something else that makes them feel wanted.”

Marchesini said the hardest part of his job was seeing young people with huge potential and value to the community, who go down the wrong path.

“And that’s down to a lot of the circumstances that they’re born into. No kid wakes up and says ‘I want to be a drug addict’.

“In many, many cases it’s around shame, not wanting to be in their environment. They then form that bond with other like-minded kids, and that’s when we start to see some of these issues play out.”

“For me, it’s about community actually being involved where they can - working with local government, working with service providers, working with local police.

“Give up some time and come down and work in those areas and actually see those kids… and build that trust. I think when children know that there’s adults in community that they can trust they’re more likely to not go down that path of offending or reoffending.”

If Marchesini said “grassroots” strategies were the way forward - and keeping an open mind about why youth offenders do what they do.

“A few days ago I was sitting in a school principal and she had been talking to a teenager about their future, and what they want to do, and they had no idea.

“They said ‘I don’t think I’ll ever get a job’. They’d lost that much value in themselves that they didn’t even feel as if they were worthy of or could even see themselves are getting a job. And that’s playing out across communities.

“So these projects and programmes - that early intervention where you can bring kids in and build their confidence… youth development is really important and bringing kids into that, to me, is where the best investment can be.

“Arresting our way out of the situation is not going to work. We’re not going to get anywhere by doing that. We can get greater success working with community, working with family and working with youth.”

There’s no bad kids - there’s just bad situations

Senior Constable Danny Eid sees the youth crime crisis from both sides, every day.

He sees the kids before the courts and he sees the kids on their way there. Kids who are desperate for the basics in life - food, a hot shower, an adult.

Eid is part of the Paramatta Police Citizen’s Youth Club, partnering with Rotary and the community to provide services to young people aimed at empowering young people to reach their potential.

From fitness classes to sports, driver training to school holiday activities, Friday night social gatherings to meals, PCYC’s offer a lot of what young people are missing in their home lives.

“There’s no bad kids - there’s just bad situations,” said Eid.

“There’s a kid that comes here who says he prefers to be in juvenile detention because there’s structure, routine and a sense of belonging. He knows what dinner he’s getting, that he’ll get sleep - he doesn’t get that at home.

“He’s breaking into people’s homes, violent offending. The crime rate spikes when he gets out.

“But he’s a good kid. He’s nice as pie - an absolutely lovely kid.”

One of Eid’s roles at PCYC is running a daily fitness class - an hour of sweat followed by breakfast where the kids can eat as much as they want, as long as they do their bit of setting up and cleaning up.

Before they head for a hot shower - which some don’t have at home - there’s a group chat.

The main themes are accountability, realising there is a consequence for every action; and making good and healthy choices.

“It’s back to basics, instilling those values - respect, manners, communication, punctuality; just try and be a nice person,” said Eid.

“Kids make bad choices, and sometimes they make seriously poor choices that affect the rest of their lives. But you just can’t judge them without knowing someone’s circumstances.”

Eid said giving youths what they need - not what adults think they need - was crucial.

“All of their lives they have been defensive, you can’t bullshit them,” said Eid.

“If they don’t value a programme, if they don’t have input and it’s something they just have to do - it’s pointless. You have to have their buy-in, and enable them to see the way.

“Sometimes all they can see is darkness. Here we provide family - we’re not here to parent you, but we look after each other. There’s a moment where kids feel safe and secure... where they can see a path forward. A safe environment is key - a place with structure that is non-judgmental... These clubs are in communities that need the them most.”

It’s about trying to understand young people

There are more than 60 PCYC clubs across NSW, each serving a unique demographic.

In Paramatta there are big Indian and Chinese communities, Redfern has traditionally been home to a strong Aboriginal population, and over in Blacktown

you'll find the highest concentrations of people claiming Pacific ancestry and Maori.

Each area has its own social issues - but the drivers of youth crime and the kids behind the offending have similar stories.

Fractured families, neglect, domestic violence, health and mental health problems, poverty, disengagement from school.

Ultimately they are all just trying to survive each day and find something to do in the world.

Each PCYC operates under the same ethos, offering education and upskilling programmes, sports and fitness and connection to other social services. But each club gets to "change the menu" to provide what its specific community needs.

Blacktown's manager Jojo Lee said it was important to offer a space kids wanted to be, that could enrich them and where they could be nurtured. Because, at the end of the day, they were just kids.

"We want this place to be like a home, with a family environment - you come here as you are, if you have issues we'll deal with them, but it's always a safe space. We'd rather have you here if you're not going to school," Lee said.

"It's about trying to understand what's going on with our young people and how to really help. We're not going out and doing things for the hell of it - it has to come from the youth and what they need."

Lee and her team all know there's no silver bullet - for youth crime in general or individual kids.

For them consistency and connection is the key.

"It's got to be a holistic approach," says Lee.

"It's so layered, it's just not something we can fix within the hour. There's a care and a love we show to everyone no matter your size, shape, colour or background. We don't determine what's going to happen, we just consult and create the structure, give them around-the-clock support."

One of the youth workers at Blacktown knows all too well what support can do for a troubled kid.

He grew up in New Zealand, his family connected to gangs and crime. In his teens he knew he had to get himself away from that to thrive.

He's been in Australia for years now, working at Blacktown to help other kids growing up like he was. Helping other kids to see there are different choices,

different ways of living and people that can help.

His staunch opinion is that a one-size-fits-all “just lock them up” approach to youth offending is not working - and really, never has.

“Human needs are the most important thing,” he said.

“It’s understanding, not growling... A lot of these kids are torn down by the system... when they come here they feel safe and that is the difference... it’s awesome to see.

“We’re changing lives here... and respect is given to everybody that walks in.”

“This is more than a programme, it’s a movement,” said Lee.

“It’s about providing a platform to allow our young people to take ownership and shine, to help them find a sense of purpose.

“We’re not a one-stop-shop and we don’t try to be. We try to put them onto community services that will really make a difference to their lives. You just have to listen, and create the space to make it happen.”

The club is their safe space - but we’re not a babysitting service

In Redfern, inner Sydney, the crime rate spikes every Friday night.

The kids have nowhere to go, nothing to do and little to go home for sometimes. To beat boredom, to fit in - often to get food and money to survive - they offend.

The local PCYC is trying to turn Redfern’s Friday nights around - and its youth.

Yillilung Gordon and his team run a Friday night programme for all locals aged 6-20 where they’re fed, entertained, supervised.

They’re in a place where they are wanted and cared for and for some of them, that’s the only time they have ever felt safe.

Gordon is Redfern born and raised; he knows the people and their issues. He’s even lived through some of them himself.

Now his mission is to give back and change the trajectory of young people before they end up part of the overrepresentation of Aboriginal Australians in juvenile detention or prison.

“Knowing the community, that’s what makes the difference,” Gordon said.

“There’s a lot of substance abuse, domestic violence and for the kids, the club is their safe space. A lot of kids come here for breakfast, we pack them a lunch and often I drive them to school. There are kids that don’t go to school, they come here instead.

“On Friday nights these kids are just walking the streets… a lot of the time it’s as basic as they don’t have any food at home.”

Gordon said many of the Indigenous kids struggle with a sense of identity, the result of growing up not only in the inner city but also in a suburb that’s been heavily gentrified over the years.

He knows how they feel and is passionate about helping them navigate that connection.

“I actually transitioned to my Indigenous name as I started really learning about my identity,” he said.

“I’m showing them I’m proud of who I am and I’m proud of my name.”

It’s just one way Gordon tries to be a good role model, someone the kids can look up to and learn from.

“These kids have no identity, no respect for the culture - but once they learn more about their connection to country, once they ‘get it’ they are just so proud.”

And when you connect to country, you can connect to your community more easily, Gordon reckons.

“I’m here to make a change in my community, that means a lot to me,” he said,

“A lot of kids here, you just want to pull them out of their cycle. When they are here they are secure and safe and we teach them about healthy lifestyle choices.

There’s a lot of community support for the Redfern PCYC - people who grew up there and still live locally doing their bit for the next generation.

Gordon said that was a crucial part of changing lives.

Rap star The Kid Laroi was born and raised Redfern by his mother and uncle, who was murdered in 2015. He has spent time with the kids at the PCYC over the years.

And many of the South Sydney Rabbitohs AFL team lend a hand where they can.

Gordon said fullback Latrell Mitchell - Birpai and Wiradjuri - was having a solo kicking session one morning and one of the PCYC kids spotted him.

He ran over and started kicking balls with the athlete, barefoot. When the boy returned to the club, he had Mitchell's boots.

Gordon said many of the kids he worked with didn't have normal shoes let alone shoes to play sport. So gestures like that from the community made a huge difference.

"We just work hard to break down the barriers," he said.

"Here they get support, they get dinner, they even get driven home if they need... But we're not a babysitting service.

"And we do have consequences - we have a ban system. If you break the rules you might get a ban for an hour, then an afternoon, then there's a serious conversation.

"At the end of the day, it's all for the kids, this is their safe place."

The narrative in their head? That they're bad, useless, dangerous, harmful.

A senior judge who has worked with young offenders in Australia for many years spoke to the *Herald* about their role - and how the court process can be a positive experience for children committing crimes.

They did not want their name published.

"The behaviour of many young offenders is due to poverty, disability or trauma which are the same factors that lead them to disengage from education before they start offending," they said.

"I think that's what people don't see. When children and young people get to court our answer is to lock them up as that's the only way we can protect the community. We look at what they've done, not what happened before they did it. A whole lot has gone wrong for a young person before they end up sitting before me.

"Locking people up is an effective short-term tool to protect the community but it's only effective during the term of the sentence. They will be released and, if they don't know how to live on the outside, then the community is less safe than if we'd used a different strategy to disrupt their offending.

"Many repeat young offenders are products of dysfunctional environments. They only know what they have experienced. We need to teach them what they need

to know to live a pro-social life, including what they've done wrong and why it is wrong. If we don't show them something different nothing will change."

The judge said the community tended to "see the world in deficits" when it came to children.

"It's easy to get frustrated by what they're not doing right or what they're doing wrong and that feedback is all some of them hear. The voice in their head tells them they're useless and we confirm what they fear," they said.

"When we lock people up we are telling them their fears are accurate - they are useless, they are dangerous, they're harmful and the community is safer when they are not in it. I think we might motivate better behaviour if we shift the story we're telling them, hoping they will then shift the story they're telling themselves."

When the judge began working with young offenders, they saw immediately that they could not be treated the same as adults in court.

"It's important to me that they know they are an important person in my court. They should feel like they can contribute and that their contribution will be heard and respected.

"At times I have gone into the foyer to reassure young people who are too anxious to come into court. We've arranged food to settle young people who are hungry - some are homeless - or who have to wait for long periods.

"Occasionally, I have asked a young person to try on my robe and look at the court from my perspective before asking what they would do if they were me and wanted to help the young person to make better choices. Or I'd sit at the bar table with them and just go 'I can tell you what to do, but you're not going to do it. What do YOU think you need to do and how do I support YOU?"

It was also important to the judge that the young people were part of her decision-making process for bail and sentencing.

They explained how they spoke to young offenders at a hearing.

"The point of bail is to stop your offending - but that's really your decision. I get to decide if I let you out or not. And if I let you out, regardless of the rules that are put in place, if you don't care about them and you just want to offend, you're going to offend. If you don't want to offend, you're not going to offend.

"If you think it's easier I can put boundaries in place about what time you get home? So you have dinner at home and sleep every night. There might be friends you think you shouldn't see as you're more likely to get in trouble with them. How about you and I work out the boundaries that might help you to stay out of trouble?"

The judge felt their approach to young offenders was not traditional - but the right way to deal with their often complex lives.

They also included the parents in the process as much as possible.

“Parents are impacted by the behaviour of their children. For some parents it is devastating. They don’t want their kids taken away - they don’t want to be sitting in our Court. Sometimes I ask the parents if they want help with anything and if they need support.

“The people in our Court are just like us - but a version of us that is poor, or has been disadvantaged, or is neurodiverse, or has made difficult decisions or poor choices.

“I might say ‘now that you’re in court let’s consider what tools I have to help if you want to make a change. If you don’t want to make a change let’s have a frank conversation.”The judge said responding to youth crime “is not black and white” and needed much more collaboration between all agencies.

‘There is no point in a government that oversees different departments and funds different organisations to support children and families if none of them talk to each other,” they said.

“When a child comes into my court at the age of 13, the police and the welfare, health and education departments have already flagged that that child and their family are a problem. We are spending so much time, money, effort and stress managing exactly the same cohort of people that then come to our court.

“Why aren’t we doing it together? No one needs to lead or get credit or recognition. It doesn’t need to be anyone’s idea, it needs to be all of us... so let’s do it together.”

The judge said it was incredibly important young offenders had a degree of autonomy over what supports or services they need to change their lives, and how they get it.

‘We know ourselves than when a friend or professional tells us what to do or what changes we should make to lead a better life, we switch off,” they said.

“So, we need to talk to them, because we’re not going to be able to disrupt their circumstances without their buy-in.”

The judge acknowledged youths were responsible for significant harm in the community and that was not excusable. But in almost every case that offender had been harmed themselves.

“I can sit down with a bunch of 14-year-old girls about what’s happening to them at parties and all of us would be in tears - it’s so bad.

“And then there are children - 10, 11, 12-year-olds who never would have offended before, breaking into houses and holding knives to people’s throats while they sleep just to get likes on their TikTok video.

“Getting likes is akin to joining gangs. It gives young people a sense of identity and belonging. On the other side might be a home where nobody is there. the cupboards and empty, or the people who are home are intoxicated, unpredictable and violent.”

There will never be a quick fix for youth offending - but the judge said there was a way to try to help every child who is responsible for the behaviour that sits behind the charges.

Empowering them by giving them some autonomy and control, connecting with, and relating to them were all crucial.

“The way an adolescent brain is wired to understand is that their sense of themselves is dictated by what they think someone sees in them,” the judge said.

“So the behaviour is a way to be liked... it helps them fit in. That risk-taking is waiting for a reaction - for people to say ‘aren’t’ you sick and hectic’ - and that kid who’s receiving it is like ‘wow... now I fit in’.

“Then you’ve got a bunch of quite scared kids who haven’t figured out a more authentic connection point... I just don’t think we’re going to change that. Our challenge is how we understand it. And how do we influence it in positive ways?”’

Understanding the trauma the children have lived with is often something overlooked in a system devised to punish and reform, the judge lamented.

“For some of the kids who are being told to stop offending, that offending is part of their family culture - perhaps their parents, siblings aunts and uncles are in gangs,” said the judge.

“They say ‘if I stop, I may never see my family again’.

“Most of the kids who have two or more offences in the children’s court... have had Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports. There is a large proportion of them who have been in care or are in care, a large proportion are Aboriginal, and a relatively large proportion have had parents who’ve been in custody.

“When they’ve been exposed to multiple adverse childhood experiences, these are the consequences.”

The judge saw a big part of her role in the youth offending space as “trying to get people to think about it differently”

“I keep saying ‘look at it from the moon’ - what are we doing? Why are we doing it?

“I think where we sometimes go wrong, is we try and fly people in to sort out a problem rather than building capacity within community… just one kid at a time.

“There are lots of people in the community who are quite good with kids, and they like them. They make the kid feel good and the kid is accountable to that positive adult for their behaviour.

“That positive adult may need to overcome some obstacles… but when they have a beautiful relationship with one kid, they’ll start to go, yeah, you can bring your friend or your brother, we can do some activities, I can feed you, I’ll be here for you whenever you need. Here’s a safe place for you.

“We need to work out a safe way for people to do that - and then recognise their contribution and promote it.”

Unravelling the clash between perception and reality around youth crime would also help matters, said the judge.

Fear would always influence people’s perception of a situation - particularly on what they have personally heard or experienced.

“It’s easy for people to perceive others in black and white - they’re criminals, and they’re not criminals. And people who are criminals need to be dealt with in a particular way It’s much harder to sit with the ambiguity of ‘these are just humans and these are human behaviours, and we as a society need to deal with them differently’,” they said.

There would always be poor behaviour and harm - but the judge said the challenge was to keep it at the lowest frequency and seriousness.

“But when it occurs, what’s the right response? And if it’s the criminal justice system… is it an adversarial system or an inquisitorial system or a therapeutic system? Does it change depending on the age of the kid or the capacity of the kid or the cultural background?

“There are too many questions… I don’t yet know what the right justice response is… I just think we can coordinate it better.

There’s no silver bullet, but what seems to be the key is everyone coming together.”

We’ve all been 14 - and we’ve all made bad decisions

In 2015 Magistrate Sue Duncombe presided over the first Youth Koori Court sitting in New South Wales.

She was an integral part of establishing the court, providing an alternative pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who have pleaded guilty to at least one offence.

The Youth Koori Court operates in a more informal way than a traditional court, with a strong emphasis on cultural issues - somewhat akin to New Zealand’s Rangatahi Courts, Ngā Kōti Rangatahi which are held on marae, and Pasifika Courts.

“It’s a therapeutic court; it’s a sentencing court but instead of sentencing straight away, the sentence is deferred to allow the young person to engage with services and cultural supports and to then demonstrate their efforts towards rehabilitation. Those efforts are taken into account when sentence occurs 9 to 12 months later,” Magistrate Duncombe explained.

“We work informally. I sit at the bar table with two elders or community panel members, preferably a male and a female. And on the other side, we have the young person with their lawyer and representatives from support agencies. They can also be supported by family members.

“It’s deliberately targeted at action and support. A young person agrees to tasks which are directed at addressing their needs. The support agencies also agree to support the young person in achieving their goals.

“I say to the young people: ‘It’s not a contract. If you find things difficult to achieve, we can amend the action and support plan’. But I don’t say that to the support agencies. They need to step up.”

Magistrate Duncombe said the Youth Koori Court was a much-needed option within the Australian justice system.

“Firstly, there is the history of trauma in this country due to the policies of removals of Aboriginal children from their families. Research shows that trauma can be transmitted genetically.

“Many parents of Youth Koori Court participants have been disconnected from their culture as a result of these past policies and that is no fault of the parents. Some of them have lacked the basic care that all children are entitled to. As a

result of that, we see an over-representation of Aboriginal young people in custody.

“Approximately three per cent of the population in Australia identifies as Aboriginal. When we first started the court, on any one day, 59 per cent of young people in custody were Aboriginal”. That is clearly unsatisfactory by any standard.

She said the majority of the kids who came before her had often committed offences that were “significantly traumatic for the community”, but in many cases giving them a custodial sentence served only one purpose - punishment.

“Other purposes of sentencing such as promoting their rehabilitation are not well served by such a sentence,” she said.

“There’s a whole lot of issues impacting on these young people and their offending behaviours. They include poverty, lack of supports, lack of education, not attending school, housing, drug and alcohol use and boredom. There are also often mental health issues present and many do not have a strong connection to their culture.”

While the court was prepared to factor in those issues - the Magistrate could and would impose a custodial sentence if the crime necessitated it.

But even then, she was dubious about the long-term benefit.

“Locking these children up is not the key to ensuring it doesn’t happen again in a lot of cases… unless they’re given a reason to change, they’re not going to change after spending a few months in custody,” she said.

“It’s a temporary solution for the community to say ‘we received justice’ but they haven’t achieved any greater protections for the future as a result of the kids being in custody. The tragedy is that after they are released back into the community, some of them on the following weekend will re-offend.

“But what we’re doing in YKC is realising that you can’t lock up a young person forever, and they should be given a chance to demonstrate that the know what they did was wrong, and wrong enough for them to spend time in custody and if they want to change that outcome, they have to change.”

Magistrate Duncombe said the hardest part of the job was when young people are not ready to accept the support she offered.

“They might spend a lot of time in the YKC and then they go out and commit a very serious offence. I find it personally very hard when this happens, but I also know that they’ve been given an opportunity and they’re not ready to accept that opportunity,” she said.

Magistrate Duncombe said by the time youths get to her court, they have often been in need of support for far too long - they had missed consistent parental guidance and support and in most cases early intervention could have prevented the offending.

“We need to support parents in need, at the earliest possible stage when they’re showing signs of distress, and when the kids are showing signs of distress as a result of the parenting, or the lack of parenting or the quality of their parenting,” she said.

“We put in place supports for the young person and if needed, their parents or carers. It’s a way of dealing with families in crisis at the earliest stage.”

So how does the Youth Koori Court engage troubled youths? How does Magistrate Duncombe get them to see the light?

“One of the key things is cultural connection and the cultural support offered,” she said.

“Any review of the Youth Koori Court has included comments from young people saying it makes a difference to have an elder there, or community panel member. They feel accountable to their elders for their actions.

“We also have a majority of Aboriginal people working with these young people. When you walk into the court, it doesn’t feel like a dominant society court. We have artwork hung on the walls which have been painted by young people in custody. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags also hang proudly.

Magistrate Duncombe said a better understanding of why youths offended and a shift of mindset around youth crime - particularly around Indigenous people and including New Zealand Maori - was sorely needed in the community.

“I want the community to understand that what’s happened has happened - and without diminishing their trauma, providing support to a young person who has caused that trauma can reduce the likelihood of this young person doing it again, to somebody else. That’s what we should be looking for”.

Magistrate Duncombe’s advice for people dealing with youth offenders was simple.

“Listen to them, and give them some hope,’ she said.

“We need to also not promise too much - we need to promise what’s achievable. We can help them, but we can’t say: ‘Oh yeah we’ll fix that for you’. We just have to be realistic and honest.

“When we listen deeply to young people in crisis, they will often guide us to a safer place for all.”

Anna Leask is a Christchurch-based reporter who covers national crime and justice. She joined the Herald in 2008 and has worked as a journalist for 18 years. She writes, hosts and produces the award-winning podcast A Moment In Crime, released monthly on nzherald.co.nz

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