

## **Report to the Northern Territory Government**

**TITLE: Background and Recommendations to the Government of the Northern Territory in response to the worsening youth crime and unacceptable behaviour issues in Alice Springs, NT.**

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**May 2022**

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## 1. Purpose of Report

This document provides recommendations to the Northern Territory Government for addressing the ongoing and rising crime problems in and around Alice Springs, with the assistance of the Alice Springs community.

## 2. Background / Research

Four years after the Northern Territory Government promised action with a comprehensive seven-point crime and anti-social behaviour plan and the promise of a swift and multi-layered response to escalating youth crime in the Territory, significant questions remain over what was proposed and what has resulted in the desired outcomes.

According to the Chief Minister and Cabinet (2019), the plan was to 'Make Alice Springs Safer' by expanding the hours of the youth drop-in centre, expanding hours of Tangentyere Night Patrol, appointing Seven Youth Engagement Night Officers, providing two School Engagement Officers and three School Compliance Officers, installing more Mobile CCTV Cameras, and establishing an Aboriginal Youth Outreach Service.

According to the Northern Territory Police's statistical data for February 2022 (PFES 2022), it is clear that criminal activity in Central Australia is increasing.

**The crime against property and against the person in Alice Springs from March 2020 to February 2022 is summarised in Table 1.**

**Table 1. Alice Springs Crime Summary**

CRIME	01/03/2020 28/02/2021	–	01/03/2021 28/02/2022	–	% CHANGE
Crime against the person	2579		2709		5.04
Crime against property	3729		4692		<b>25.82</b>

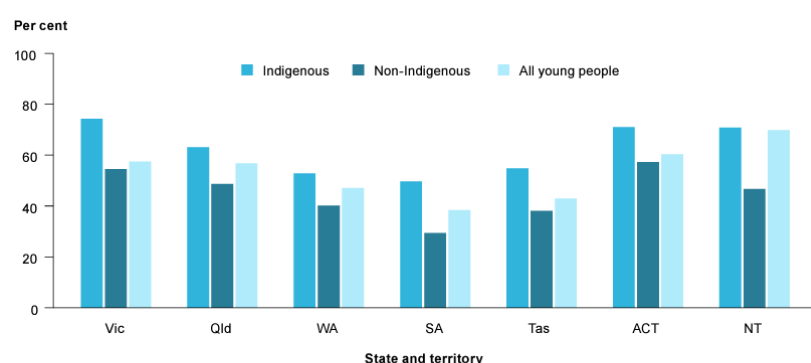
**Source: NT Balance Crime Statistics, 2022, <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/police/community-safety/nt-crime-statistics/nt-balance>**

It should also be noted that not all crimes are reported. Recent talks (May 2022), with residents and business owners revealed that many do not report all crimes because they view it as a waste of time or because doing so would result in higher insurance costs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the actual number of property offences is more than what is being conveyed within the reported statistics. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this analysis, data collected from the NT Police have been utilised.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020), children and adolescents who have been mistreated or neglected are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour and join the youth justice system.

Seventy percent of Northern Territory youth under youth justice supervision in 2018–19 also received a child protection service in the five years from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019; this was followed by the Australian Capital Territory (60 percent), Victoria (57 percent), and Queensland (57 percent). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Young people who had been under youth supervision in 2018-2019 and had also received child protection services in the 5 years from 1 July 2014 – 30 June 2019.**



**Notes**

1. Variability in the level of overlap for child protection and youth justice among the states and territories may be due to variation in legislation, procedures, policies and practices in each state and territory, relating both to youth justice and to child protection.
2. Young people who were under youth justice supervision during 2018–19 and young people who received a child protection service between 1 July 2014 – 30 June 2019 were included in the analysis.

**Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘Young People under Supervision and Child Protection Services’, 2018-19, pp. 11**

According to the 2010 Report of the Board of Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory, any system intended to protect children must also consider their broader well-being and developmental needs in the context of the families, communities, and schools in which they reside, grow, are raised, and are educated.

The system for protecting children in the Northern Territory consists of government and non-government agencies working independently or in collaboration across the spectrum of health services, family support services, education and training, housing, police, and correctional services, in addition to the Northern Territory Families and Children Department.

According to the findings of the report, community members in each of the 15 surveyed communities consistently cited support with parenting as one of their highest needs. They confessed that it was difficult for them to establish and stick to enforcing boundaries, which has contributed to criminal activity and overall disorder throughout the Alice Springs township.

It goes on to note that early childhood home visiting initiatives, parenting skills training and parent-child attachment-based programmes, community development and healing strategies, and programmes to address parental risk factors — such as bereavement, mental illness, and substance abuse — are all possible departmental interventions.

In addition, the report observed that community disadvantage is characterised as the absence of circumstances that foster healthy child development, such as libraries, parks, child care, quality schools, health services, and employment possibilities. Income security, stable and secure housing in safe locations, affordable health care, food security, and access to social services are all crucial components; nevertheless, parental services and supports are limited due to widespread inequality. Cited in the inquiry, a lack of education and resources, may lead to large number of children being subjected to poor outcomes.

The Mparntwe/Alice Springs Youth Action Plan 2019-2021 was launched in October 2019 to tackle the issue of youth crime, which is recognised throughout Central Australia. This followed the April 2018 announcement of the Northern Territory Government's Regional Youth Services Framework.

The purpose of the Youth Action Plan was to identify the community's long-term goals and priorities in cooperation with youth and other key community stakeholders. The Youth Action Plan centred on Mparntwe/Alice Springs and surrounding town camps and emphasised that regional planning and investment in services would take place over the next few years.

**According to the NT Government, The Youth Action Plan's (2019) objectives were to:**

- Build capacity of existing youth services to enable long-term sustainable change
- Improve outcomes for young people in the Youth Justice system
- Better support for remote communities
- Support the development and implementation of mentoring programs for Aboriginal young people
- Improve education, training, development, and employment outcomes for disengaged youth
- Develop integrated programs for young people who are out late at night
- Encourage the development of housing options that are flexible and responsive to the needs of young people

**Source:** <https://cmc.nt.gov.au/breaking-the-cycle/breaking-the-cycle-alice-springs>

The Northern Territory Government website states that a review of the plan was due for completion in April 2022.

Notably, local Aboriginal leaders have advocated increasing involvement in the local justice system, the use of personal experience to deter other young from engaging in risky behaviour, and the utilisation of current programmes such as community sports and night patrols.

Instead of sending their children to the infamous Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in the Northern Territory, the families of the offending youth would prefer that their children be disciplined locally.

### **3. Data Collection and Analysis**

Business owners, community members, and the Town Council of Alice Springs gave information, perspectives, and ideas that highlighted a similar thread, with many expressing that support and action must begin at home and in the community. The group also believed that ongoing property crime and criminal offences have a significant impact on population growth and retention due to safety concerns; tourism growth due to negative news; economic conditions due to business closures and repairs; and, most importantly, the overall sentiment of the community.

Central Australia has been notoriously associated with a current negative narrative and stigma, and it is clear that the residents of Alice Springs are enthused about their city and want to do their best to reverse this.

#### **Additional comments from the key meetings and actual events include the following:**

Weekend crime peaks if Alice Springs is holding an event, such as football games or funerals.

Individuals abusing hand sanitizer through extracting alcohol for ingestion

Dysfunctional families - overcrowding and lack of boundaries

Existing resources are reactive rather than proactive.

Locally led solutions must be developed from the ground up.

The situation must be recognised as a crisis by the NT Government before we can address it collectively.

Glaziers are unable to complete works or go to jobs because they are too exhausted from frequent repair work and a personnel shortage.

Employees are being held captive while businesses are trashed, and cars are stolen.

Major retailers want to come to Alice but won't because of the crime problem.

Crimes aren't being reported because of rising insurance premiums.

Children are stealing basic food items due to apparent neglect.

External visitation reduction due to reputations of crime and safety issues.

Opportunistic car break-ins, and rock throwing onto commercial premises glass facades out of apparent boredom by youths is harming both the fabric and reputation of the Alice Springs community.

Need an Independent Commissioner, i.e., an ex-judge

Social media is promoting notoriety.

Violent daylight assaults.

#### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions**

The Property Council of Australia's NT Division recommends that the Northern Territory Government agree and commit to appointing an Independent Commissioner to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of departmental resources and the expected implications and outcomes of those resources specific to Alice Springs.

The Northern Territory Government should support the Independent Commissioner, who would be responsible for analysing and reporting on all departments dealing with youth and justice. This includes, but is not limited to, education, families and children, housing, police, fire, and emergency services, domestic violence, and the law.

The Independent Commissioner would assess whether both Police and associated wrap around services resources by way of both Government departments and NGOs are effectively being coordinated and make recommendations as to possible cross- operational and changes in reporting standards.

The Property Council's NT Division is of the opinion that this appointment requires a bipartisan approach and is critical that it involve community grass roots input, be outcome driven and most importantly remain apolitical.

The 2017 Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory provided the Northern Territory Government and the Federal Government with findings and recommendations addressing the detention and welfare systems in the Northern Territory. Since the report's inception, it is suggested that the Independent Commissioner investigate which recommendations have been implemented by the Northern Territory Government.

Recommendations included several modifications, such as.

- The closure of the present Don Dale Youth Detention Centre and High Security Unit.
- Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 12 and permitting detention of children under 14 solely for serious offences
- Developing a 10-year Families and Children's General Strategy to address child protection and the prevention of harm to children.
- Establishing a network of Family Support Centres around the NT to provide families with location-based services.
- A shift in the paradigm of adolescent justice to encourage diversion and therapeutic approaches



- Creating a new model for bail and secure detention accommodation
- Increasing Aboriginal Organisations' engagement and participation in child protection, youth justice, and imprisonment.

**Source: Royal Commission 2017 report into the Protection & Detention of Children in the Northern Territory**

The Mparntwe / Alice Springs Youth Action Plan 2019-2021 includes funding for a number of cross-agency initiatives; consequently, it would play a crucial role in evaluating the financed resources and the success of the initiatives adopted.

As described on the website of the Northern Territory Government, <https://revitalisingalice.nt.gov.au/initiatives/breaking-the-cycle-of-youth-crime> in an effort to interrupt the cycle of crime, the following measures were implemented:

- **Impartyemwerre: Alice Springs Interagency Family and Youth Operational Framework:** focuses on young people (and their families) to ensure issues causing bad behaviour are identified and tackled to reduce the likelihood of future offending or reoffending. The Framework comprises Ure Group (high risk), Kwatye Group (medium risk), and Kwerte Group (low risk and emerging). The Framework provides overarching objectives, principles, and reporting lines across the three groups.
- **School-based policing**, with a more flexible approach than the previous school policing program, to provide more flexibility to target at risk young people. The program focuses on positive youth engagement and delivery of vital safety education.
- \$1.75 million each year for **youth activities** in Alice Springs for after hours and during school holidays.
- The \$5 million **Back on Track** program is an alternative and intensive youth intervention program that provides alternative pathways to divert young people away from the youth justice system. The program addresses at risk behaviour, consequences, and reparation to reduce offending, ensure offenders face the impact of their actions and become productive members of our community.
- Funding for 10 non-government organisations to **provide youth diversion services** across 48 locations throughout the Territory, including restorative justice conferences where the young offender and the victim are present.
- Government-funded **nightly security patrols** conducted by Talice Security throughout the Alice Springs CBD.

- The \$20 million revitalisation of the CBD includes a \$5 million Crime Prevention through Environmental Design suite of initiatives, including the construction of safety zones, and improved lighting and wayfinding.

**Source: *Breaking the Cycle of Youth Crime*, <https://revitalisingalice.nt.gov.au/initiatives/breaking-the-cycle-of-youth-crime>**

In addition to the aforementioned, the following would also necessitate research of result success:

- **Appointment of seven additional Youth Outreach Officers** to provide a new night service. Youth Outreach and Re-engagement Officers (YOREOs) engage with young people identified as being regularly involved in crime. They have expanded their service to include seven days a week from 8pm-3am. YOREOs are specialist professional youth workers assigned to provide intensive support to young people up to the age of 17 who are unsupervised in public places in Alice Springs. They make dedicated referrals for ongoing support, programs and services to government and non-government youth services according to the needs of the young person. YOREOs work closely with NT Police, Territory Families Youth Outreach and Re-Engagement Team (YORET) and non-government youth services to ensure the safety of and ongoing support for young people.
- **Expansion of the youth drop-in centres** at Gap Youth and Community Centre and Tangentyere Council Brown Street are now operating seven nights a week and have extended their bus service.
- **Expansion of the hours of the Tangentyere Night Patrol** to get young people off the streets. Patrols now run seven nights a week from 6pm-3am.
- **Creation of an Aboriginal Youth Outreach Service.** The Aboriginal Youth Outreach Service builds community cohesion and resilience by supporting cultural activities and events. In addition, a team of senior, respected Aboriginal outreach workers provide advice and support to youth engagement officers and mentor young Aboriginal people, drawing on the cultural authority of the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group and Tangentyere Council Men's Four Corners Group.
- **Allocation of two School Engagement Officers** to work with young people who have been identified as being disengaged from schooling. These officers have been appointed.
- **Allocation of three School Compliance Officers** to work with young people when attempts to increase school attendance has not been successful. These officers have been appointed.
- **Place more mobile CCTV cameras in antisocial behaviour hotspots.** Mobile CCTV cameras allow police to rapidly deploy an overt surveillance capability that can be monitored live to assist in detecting incidents and identifying and prosecuting offenders.

***Source: Breaking the Cycle of Youth Crime, <https://revitalisingalice.nt.gov.au/initiatives/breaking-the-cycle-of-youth-crime>***

Key questions would initially determine if the aforementioned items were applied and when, as well as whether the anticipated effect was reached. Are they still effective? Unless so, why not? And can the resources be utilised more effectively to provide more support to regions of success?

An Independent Commissioner, as part of their terms of reference, would be expected to evaluate what is working and what is not, as well as what has been accomplished vs what has been promised or committed to.

In addition to the foregoing, the Property Council NT Division suggests that the Independent Commissioner consider the "Better Strategies to Respond to Youth Issues" (2011) Paper (Attachment A) created by non-Government agencies (NTCOSS), which includes eleven proposals to address youth issues in Alice Springs.

Furthermore, a Youth Summit with the participation of business owners, community leaders, traditional owners, indigenous owned corporations, land councils, the town council, principals, police, youth support services, and most importantly, youth, are recommended in Alice Springs. The purpose of the summit would be to collectively generate ground-up actions and input for the Independent Commissioner to investigate further.

Ideally the summit would be facilitated by a professional and strong facilitator in order to maintain a solution orientated focus. While it is anticipated that there likely will be emotional responses given the extent and personal nature of the involved issues, the facilitator would be focused on outcomes through a contest of possible initiatives to be adopted at a community through to that of an NTG/NGO services level.

Subsequent to our own discussions with various Alice Springs stakeholders, the Property Council NT Division is of the opinion that the suggested adoption of an independent commissioner framework is a potential way forward for a community-wide effort towards addressing the complex issues surrounding the town's youth. Even though it is generally understood by all that there is not a simple fast fix solution, for the benefit of the future of Alice Springs the time has come that the issue of youth crime and antisocial behaviour must now be addressed by the NT Government.

Recognising that the government, industry, and community sectors must all play a role, this procedure demands a collaborative approach.

It is suggested that all committed parties be held accountable for meeting time-based objectives through regular reporting mechanisms.

It is anticipated that the Northern Territory take into consideration the recommendations and go forwards with an action plan on either resolving the issue of criminal activity in Central Australia or at least reducing it to a more manageable level.

*\*It is important to note that the Property Council was advised during the May trip to Alice Springs, of a venue that could be used free of charge for the purpose of a youth summit. \**

## References

Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018-19, 'Young People under Supervision and Child Protection Services', viewed 15 May 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-in-child-protection/summary>

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Mparntwe/Alice Springs Youth Action Plan 2019-2021, viewed 15 May 2022, [https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/748171/Mparntwe-Alice-Springs-Youth-Action-Plan.pdf](https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/748171/Mparntwe-Alice-Springs-Youth-Action-Plan.pdf)

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NT Balance Crime Statistics, 2022, <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/police/community-safety/nt-crime-statistics/nt-balance>

NT Royal Commission, 2017, Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-09/report-overview.pdf>

## Attachment A.

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### Better Strategies to Respond to Youth Issues

#### in Alice Springs

#### Youth Sector Meeting (Non-Government agencies)

14 March 2011

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##### Introduction

On 14 March 2011, representatives of non-Government agencies who deliver services to young people in Alice Springs attended a workshop facilitated by Penny Drysdale (consultant) funded by the Alice Springs Youth Hub to identify a shared view on the best way to respond to youth issues in Alice Springs.

The workshop began by brainstorming the question of '*What do we want for the young people of Alice Springs?*' and identifying a number of principles and assumptions which we believe underpin the most effective approaches to responding to young people. Summary of those conversations can be seen in Appendix 1 and 2 of this document.

It is recognised that the voices of the people who would be impacted by these strategies, in particular young people and Aboriginal community members, have not been captured in this process.

A key area for the youth sector to focus on therefore, is the inherent challenges of working in a cross cultural environment and the issue of how Aboriginal young people from urban, remote and town camp communities participate in activities and access public space in Alice Springs. It is critical then, that youth focused community development programs ensure that there is room for strong local Aboriginal input into the decision making process.

Furthermore the youth sector must develop meaningful strategies in terms of engaging Aboriginal community members as local consultants to ensure membership on key youth specific committees. The importance of building personalised and trusting relationships with young people and families to effectively address the ongoing issue for young people in Alice Springs relies on engaging in consistent, face to face and respectful consultation with Aboriginal community members.

It is hoped that the strategies outlined in this paper can be used as a starting point to openly and meaningfully engage with these groups, as we know from experience that only through truly inclusive approaches is lasting community change achieved. Below is a summary of the proposals developed from the workshop. It is hoped that this document will contribute to the current debate in Alice Springs about how best to respond to young people and to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

