

Inquiry into the Decriminalisation of Certain Public Offences, and Health and Welfare Responses

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Queensland Family & Child Commission



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Ms Corrine McMillan MP
Member for Mansfield
Chair
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House, George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Ms McMillan MP

The Queensland Family & Child Commission (QFCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Community Support and Services Committee's Inquiry (the Inquiry) into decriminalisation of being intoxicated in a public place, begging in a public place and urinating in a public place (the three offences), and health and social welfare-based responses.

The QFCC is a statutory body of the Queensland Government responsible for promoting the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children, young people and their families.ⁱ This includes advocating for the voices of children to be heard and their views to be taken into consideration in all decisions affecting them.ⁱⁱ

Decriminalising public intoxication, begging and public urination

The QFCC supports the three offences being decriminalised. The QFCC notes the harm that public drunkenness and public urination can have on children and their families. Children do not want to grow up in unsafe communities.

The QFCC encourages the Committee to hear from children and young people whilst conducting its Inquiry. Children and young people are an invaluable source of information on the issues that impact them. The QFCC has spoken with our Youth Advisory Council (YAC) about specific issues raised in the Inquiry.

YAC members were of the view that:

- The offence of begging should be decriminalised as this offence does not reflect the supportive society children and young people want to live in.

Level 8, 63 George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000
PO Box 15217
Brisbane City East Qld 4002
Telephone 07 3900 6000
Facsimile 07 3900 6050
Website qfcc.qld.gov.au
ABN: 91 102 013 458

- The offence of intoxication should be decriminalised provided responses are balanced with the need to maintain the safety of the community and the intoxicated person.
- Vaping is one issue which is increasingly impacting on children and young people and YAC members believe offences related to vaping should also have health and social welfare-based responses for the children and young people who engage in this behaviour:
 - YAC members reported police have been called out to attend schools in response to vaping allegations. However, this was not considered to be a meaningful or effective response; and
 - the Committee is asked to consider this issue in the context of the term of reference 'g' as it is relevant to the 'other drugs' component of this term.
- Messaging which simply says drinking alcohol, vaping or using other drugs is 'illegal' does not deter children away from these kinds of behaviours.
- Health and social-welfare responses which would assist children and young people include:
 - educational programs which explain the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs (including tobacco and marijuana associated with vaping) and the consequences of intoxication in the short term (for example the impacts on decision-making ability and physical functioning) and in the long term (the impacts on a person's health with regular or long term use);
 - education, information and support for children and young people to help them transition out of using alcohol, vaping or other drugs;
 - peer support to help children and young people overcome issues relating to the use of alcohol, vaping and other drugs; and
 - increased ability for young people in rural and regional areas to access support and information, both in person and online.
- Health and social welfare-based responses for children and young people should be designed in consultation with children and young people to effectively address their needs.

In terms of children coming before the Childrens Courts charged with any of the three offences, the Queensland Sentencing Information Service shows the following sentence outcomes following a plea of guilty:ⁱⁱⁱ



Offence	Total Cases	Penalty	Indigenous status if known
Urinating in a public place	2	Both received a reprimand	1 Indigenous 1 non-Indigenous
Begging in a public place	1	Reprimand	1 Indigenous
Being drunk in a public place	12	10 x Reprimand 1 x Good Behaviour Order 1 x Probation with no conviction recorded	3 Indigenous 9 unknown
Total	15		5 Indigenous 10 non-Indigenous or unknown

These numbers, when compared to the charge data provided by the [Queensland Police Service's Answers to Questions taken on notice](#) suggest a large proportion of charges do not proceed to a final Court outcome, however, this does show children are having contact with the criminal justice system for minor offences.

Research shows the most effective way to improve outcomes for youth offending is to take a preventative and supportive approach, rather than a criminal justice response.^{iv}

The QFCC has previously identified future opportunities for the Federal and State Governments to improve the youth justice system's responses to children, which include:

- the youth justice system would be more effective in improving the lives of vulnerable children and keeping the community safe if it viewed at-risk young people through a rights and well-being, rather than a criminal lens; and
- governments (both state and federal) need to make long-term, outcomes-based investments in prevention and early intervention in the health of children and families, with regular review points. Investment should not be siloed by agency but shift to person-centred care.^v

It is also important to ensure decriminalisation of the three offences does not result in the unintended consequence of police exercising their discretion to charge the more serious offence of 'commit public nuisance' (which can also include behaviour such as public intoxication, begging or urinating in a public place).

The offence of public nuisance can attract a period of detention whereas the offences of being intoxicated in a public place and urinating in a public place are not punishable by imprisonment.

To ensure this does not occur, the Committee should consider police charging practices as part of its deliberations.

During the Committee's Public Briefing on 12 July 2022, diversion centres were discussed as a safe place for people to sober up and get support, however the Queensland Police Service informed the Committee that any person under 18 are not accepted at diversion centres.^{vi} The QFCC is concerned that children will continue to be transferred to watchhouses when no other place of safety is identified.^{vii}

Prior to the announcement of the Inquiry, the QFCC heard from stakeholders about the challenges children and young people face regarding alcohol and other drugs. The QFCC was told there is a lack of acute support for adolescent mental health and drug and alcohol recovery.^{viii} In addition, we were told about the lack of public inpatient facilities for drug and alcohol rehabilitation for children in regional areas and in remote Indigenous communities.^{ix} We anticipate the capacity of these services will need to be increased.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately impacted and overrepresented in the three offences being examined by the Committee.^x Queensland Health stated in their briefing paper to the Committee that co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is needed to develop meaningful and sustainable responses.^{xi} The QFCC agrees with this approach and believes health and social welfare-based responses must be culturally safe and should be co-designed and developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

If the Committee has any queries in relation to this submission, they may contact me on 07 3900 6000 or at [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely



Luke Twyford
Principal Commissioner
Queensland Family & Child Commission



Natalie Lewis
Commissioner
Queensland Family & Child Commission

ⁱ *Family and Child Commission Act 2014* (Qld), s.4.

ⁱⁱ United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 12 accessed 11 August 2022
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ For the period November 2017 to October 2021

^{iv} Queensland Family and Child Commission, *Changing the Sentence Overseeing Queensland's youth justice reforms*, p. 4 accessed 15 August 2022 <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/QFCC%20Changing%20the%20Sentence%20lo%20res%20spreads.pdf>

^v Ibid, p.8.

^{vi} Community Support and Services Committee, *Public Briefing – Inquiry into the decriminalisation of certain public offences and the health and welfare responses – Transcript of Proceedings Tuesday 12 July 2022*, p. 4 and 17 accessed 12 August 2022 <https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/CSSC-0A12/IDCPOHWR-FA50/Transcript%20-%202012%20July%202022%20-%20CSSC%20-%20Briefing%20-%20Inquiry%20into%20the%20decriminalisation%20of%20certain%20public%20offences%20and%20health%20and%20welfare%20responses.pdf>

^{vii} Ibid, p. 2 and 3.

^{viii} Queensland Family and Child Commission, *Changing the Sentence Overseeing Queensland's youth justice reforms*, p. 56 accessed 12 August 2022 <https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/QFCC%20Changing%20the%20Sentence%20lo%20res%20spreads.pdf>

^{ix} Ibid, p. 83.

^x Community Support and Services Committee, *Public Briefing – Inquiry into the decriminalisation of certain public offences and the health and welfare responses – Transcript of Proceedings Tuesday 12 July 2022*, p. 4, 9-10.

^{xi} Queensland Health, *Briefing Paper – Queensland Health – 11 July 2022*, p. 2 accessed 12 August 2022 <https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/CSSC-0A12/IDCPOHWR-FA50/Correspondence%20%20E2%80%93%20Queensland%20Health%20-%202011%20July%202022.pdf>

