

Dubbo Conversations

Most Aboriginal young people in Dubbo do not end up in the juvenile justice system. What makes the difference for them compared to those that do enter the system?

And therefore, what can be done by philanthropy?

A summary of conversations and observations in Dubbo to inform philanthropic funding by Dusseldorp Forum (DF) and Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF).

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Introduction

In 2013, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and Dusseldorp Forum (DF) made a joint commitment to provide philanthropic support towards reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the juvenile justice system in NSW. In this work, we aim to complement the ongoing efforts of government, non-government service providers and communities in supporting children involved with the justice system, whose profile is often one of multiple and entrenched intergenerational disadvantage.

Acknowledging the complexity of this issue and limited philanthropic resources, our task is to determine - *where can philanthropy's contribution have the greatest impact in reducing the numbers of young Aboriginal people being incarcerated in NSW?* We decided to undertake community-level consultation to inform this task and our future funding decisions. In April 2014, we convened a Reference Group to advise us on the process.

The Group suggested we focus discussions with one community that has both high rates of youth recidivism as well as thriving young Aboriginal people, to identify ways to increase the number of those on positive pathways and reduce the numbers in and out of custody.

Much has been written on the problems of juvenile offending, and the issues in Indigenous communities. It was determined that a useful focus for this work would be the practical and the local; tapping into local knowledge and experiences to reveal examples and suggestions of what can be done to change the trajectory of children in or at risk of entering the system.

The Reference Group assisted to refine the scope of consultation to;

1. Focus in the first instance on one regional setting with high numbers of incarcerated young people and repeat offending
2. Explore different trajectories or outcomes for young people using hot spot/cold spot comparison
3. Gain local knowledge from those on the ground – hearing from people that may not generally part of the existing body of research
4. Concentrate on what works and the practical solutions - not reiterating local problems or generic criminogenic factors relating to juvenile offending
5. Share and deliver on the findings to stimulate broader discussion and new thinking about reducing the contact of Aboriginal children with courts and prisons.

Dubbo was confirmed as a place that has both high rates of incarceration and repeat offending as well as thriving young Aboriginal people who do not spend time in prison – in other words, both a 'hot spot' and 'cold spot' for juvenile offending, offering a comparative setting to drill into the factors that make the most difference in the lives of young people.

Between August and December 2014, discussions were held with 87 community members and service providers, including 29 young people, 21 community members and 37 agency representatives, many of whom were Aboriginal people living in Dubbo and surrounding areas. Agencies that participated in the consultations included NSW Police, Dubbo PCYC, the local court Magistrate, Juvenile Justice NSW, Apollo House (East Dubbo), Dubbo Regional Aboriginal Health Service, Western Plains Medical Centre, Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Council, Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT Western Region, NSW Legal Aid, Mission Australia, Uniting Care Burnside, Centacare, Dubbo College Mulgabirra Girls Engagement Program, Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Aboriginal Cultural Camp program, Shine Sistaz Program, University of Sydney School of Rural Health, Neami Mental Health Facility, Mac River Youth Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Centre, Taronga Zoo Making Tracks Program, Western NSW Family Referral Service, NSW Families and Community Services and the Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre.

Our thanks to those involved from the Dubbo community, for their openness and interest in working with us and to our Children and Prison Reference Group members: Peta McGillvray, Brendan Thomas, John Kirby, Edwina Crawford and Professor Tony Vinson and to the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and Juvenile Justice NSW (Department of Justice) for their advice and support.

Executive summary

This paper is based on conversations and observations which took place during August to December 2014 in Dubbo and suggests reasons why the lives of some young Aboriginal people in that area follow positive trajectories and others follow negative ones. An analysis of what appears to be working in the community, and what is not, is provided along with suggestions on how VFFF and DF might support identified strengths and fill the apparent gaps towards reducing incarceration of children in Dubbo. The paper concludes with recommendations for philanthropic action to be considered by the Children and Prison Reference Group with a view to presenting these to the Boards of VFFF and DF.

Some children who enter the juvenile justice system are unlikely to have experienced a consistently safe and stable home and simply do not know the difference between right and wrong. In many cases they do not have someone who cares for them and, importantly, to whom they are accountable. These children are unlikely to have completed school or be engaged in employment. Being unable to identify with positive adult role models or a positive peer group they are likely to be disconnected from their community.

Those on negative trajectories may be diverted to more positive outcomes if learning barriers are identified and addressed early, children have access to safe accommodation and there is consistent contact with a positive role model. Sustained support by caseworkers for children and their families from their first contact with the justice system is also considered an important diversion mechanism. On a very practical level, assistance with obtaining and keeping a driver's license would likely decrease the number of young people in detention.

There is no lack of programs to assist youth in Dubbo. The report identifies three programs that were unanimously endorsed by the community as working to assist young Aboriginal people at risk of entering, or already in, the juvenile justice system. There are also a number of programs that showed promise and some with more mixed reviews. Positively there have been a number of recent improvements in primary and mental health services in the region.

Aspects requiring improvement are service continuity, co-ordination and access. There is a widely recognised gap in alcohol and drug rehabilitation facilities for adults and it follows this adds to the vulnerability of families and children and a lack of safe accommodation. Frustration was widely voiced with the perceived inability of local schools to manage behavioural issues and foster an interest in learning in all children. While there are a number of identified Aboriginal champions in the community, there is a perceived lack of local leadership and cohesion. This is speculated to result from the growing and transient nature of the population, different language groups and pockets of apathy and negative attitude.

A number of key themes emerged when locals were asked how children could be kept from offending (and reoffending) in Dubbo. Safe housing and rehabilitation facilities, support for better parenting, mentors, support for schools and programs for boys in detention were consistently referred to. There is a strong view that better co-ordination and case management for all children at court, particularly at the initial encounter, and once they are released from detention would assist with reducing incarceration and recidivism.

The paper concludes with a recommendation that philanthropic action adopt a staged approach with an immediate response to short term recommendations. It could then be determined how best to catalyse action on the more complex longer-term opportunities to provide safe accommodation and intensive support for justice-involved families.

The Children and Prison Reference Group met on 3 March 2015 to consider *Dubbo Conversations*, and the recommendations for philanthropic action which are detailed below. The recommendations were endorsed by the Reference Group and subsequently considered by the Boards of VFFF and DF in late March.

Short-term Responding to community	Medium-term Strengthening the system	Long-term Addressing complex issues
Grants program for high potential local activities	Coordinated casework from first contact with court	Transitional housing
Build on existing specific programs	Cross-sector training package	Intensive support for identified families
	Broad-scale mentoring	

Directors of both foundations approved in principle, investment towards the recommendations provided and agreed that representatives of VFFF and DF share the paper with the Dubbo community and seek local advice on implementing the recommendations in the most effective way.

To assist this process with a concrete starting point, a funding commitment of up to \$150,000 per annum for three years was made to progress the 'short-term' recommendations as well as up to \$100,000 towards operational resourcing in Dubbo over the next 12 months to explore and develop the ground work towards the medium and long term recommendations.

About Dubbo

Dubbo is a city located at the intersection of the Mitchell, Newell and Golden Highways. It is the largest population centre in the Orana Region of NSW, with a population of over 40,000 people and services a catchment of approximately 130,000. By road it is 400km from Sydney and is a major road and rail freight hub to other parts of NSW. Dubbo is a key health and human service hub for many far western NSW communities.

Dubbo's population has more than doubled in the last 40 years and is expected to exceed 50,000 by 2036. The median resident age is 36, children aged 0 - 14 years old make up 22.5% of the population. 12.8% of residents in Dubbo identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The Tubbagah People of the Wiradjuri Nation are Dubbo's Traditional Owners.

On Census night in 2011, there were 4,984 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Dubbo with a median age of 19 years. Of Dubbo's Indigenous population 60% (2,300) are less than 25 years of age, more than double the national average of 24%.

In June 2006, the Dubbo Community Working Party (DCWP) developed the *Dubbo Aboriginal Community Strategy 2006 – 2020 'Community and Families Working with Government to Shape the Future'*. The strategy offers insights into the Dubbo Aboriginal community:

- Dubbo is home to Aboriginal families from at least 57 different cultural groups
- Respect for customs, family and culture have been lost for many people. Aboriginal family structures and cultural expectations are not understood by many people, especially young people
- Many people in the wider Dubbo community have little understanding of Aboriginal culture
- 65% of Aboriginal people are renting and many do not have secure tenure. Some housing estates have poor amenities and do not offer full security and safety
- Truancy and suspension rates are high and the rates of Aboriginal children completing Year 10 is below the national average and the Dubbo community average
- Aboriginal children's attendance at pre-school and child care is below the Dubbo community average
- The unemployment rate for Indigenous young people over 16 years is 78%

According to 2012-13 data from Juvenile Justice NSW and the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research:

- 127 children from Dubbo¹ were detained on either a control or remand order, representing the greatest number of children in detention outside Sydney local government areas
- 96.21% of the children detained in Dubbo were Aboriginal
- 11 children were placed under a control order in the twelve months up to September 2013, the second highest number in regional NSW, after Taree
- Children in Dubbo and Taree, received the average longest sentence in the 12 months to September 2013, with an average of six months

¹ Postcode of residence at time of arrest

Understanding the different trajectories of young Aboriginal people in Dubbo

What makes a difference for children who enter the juvenile justice system and those that don't?

1. A safe and stable home

The most frequently identified factor that thriving young people had in common was a safe, stable family environment and home. Analysis of notes from ten discussions with key Aboriginal community program coordinators, volunteers, community leaders and members demonstrates that *'family', 'family support' or 'caring, love and support'* was referenced in eight out of ten discussion as making the key difference for kids who thrive in Dubbo. Representatives from justice agencies echoed this sentiment, with a NSW Police representative commenting *'Family – it's so obvious. There are many young people doing really well, you look behind them and the parents are there...'* Similarly, the PCYC manager commented *'We've had 4 or 5 Koori kids working here and the one common denominator is a stable family environment'*. Reflecting on the how some kids end up in detention, a community legal service solicitor observed *'They are kids whose parents are just off the rails'*.

It was suggested that there are many incidences of parents bringing children from the far western communities of Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett to Dubbo and then returning, leaving the children with extended family who are unable to properly care for them or manage their behavioural issues which is often leading to their eviction from the home. The inability of parents and extended family to care for, and manage children with behavioural issues was suggested to be a key factor in breaches of bail. Poverty, unemployment and the increased cost of living also reduced the capacity of extended family to care for children other than their own. As a result, in some instances children are committing theft to get food.

The prevalence of young people from far western communities who remain in Dubbo without adequate support results in many young people 'couch-surfing'. Youth support workers who supervise young offenders indicated that many children, particularly in the Apollo Estate area located in East Dubbo, often don't have a bed and were lucky to have a mattress on the floor or to sleep on a couch when adults had gone to bed. This was identified as another contributing factor to children walking the streets at night, particularly when there are parties or conflict at home.

Drug and alcohol misuse by parents, and in some instances grandparents, was consistently blamed for the breakdown of many family homes. Almost all of the community members and stakeholders identified ice (crystal methamphetamine) as a priority problem for the whole community. While alcohol and cannabis were traditionally the drugs of choice, ice is now the greatest concern across generations, sometimes destroying entire families. Concerns about the use of drugs by children were not as commonly identified as concerns about their parents, although those working with young offenders indicated that in most instances, young people who were charged were under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs at the time of the offence.

Many people identified depression and other mental health issues as detrimental to the capacity of parents to care for their children, exacerbating the disconnection from their families. It was suggested that mental health and alcohol and drug misuse were interconnected, with some people self-medicating with illicit drugs and others experiencing mental health disorders as a result of alcohol and other drug use.

The absence of stable accommodation was also cited as a reason that children are either unable to access bail, or remain in detention on remand awaiting suitable accommodation. One young man, who

had just completed a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, voiced concerns about his lack of accommodation options. He feared having to return to his home community, where he had been bailed to reside with his sister, because drug and alcohol misuse was common in the community, among his peers and relatives and there had been a recent spate of youth suicides. While he was keen to relocate elsewhere, the courts had deemed his sister's residence to be a more stable housing option.

Numerous people, including Police, justice workers, community service providers and community members cited examples of young people committing offences so that they could return to detention. This occurred particularly in the colder winter months, so they could access food, shelter and comparative safety.

2. Knowing right from wrong

A number of people who work with children in the criminal justice system indicated that a key difference for those who do, or do not enter the system, is basically knowing right from wrong.

A local respected Aboriginal man, who leads one of the few Aboriginal organisations in town, reflected *'I could have gone to jail a couple of times, but my parents had taught me to stop and think'*. PCYC staff suggested that it is mostly working parents that teach their children right from wrong. In discussing the difference between children who offend and others, one young Aboriginal man who works at the PCYC immediately responded to an example of inappropriate behaviour with *'Oh no, my Mum wouldn't let me do that'*.

The absence of adequate parenting and development was blamed for some children lacking social skills, being unaware of social boundaries, behaving in a confrontational manner, communicating aggressively and defensively and having poor hygiene. A senior justice officer suggested *'one of the best things you could teach these kids to be able to walk down the street without saying 'get f@cked' to everyone they walk past'*. People who work with young people observed that many of them lack understanding of the consequences of their actions, which increases their risk of committing crime and entering the criminal justice system.

For many children, negative and inappropriate behaviour has been normalised, including drug use, violence, aggressive communication and crime. Family violence was identified in particular as an issue that impacts on the way children behave. One prominent community leader explained *'I didn't realise my Pop bashing Nan was wrong. Your mum being a victim is just normal'*.

Some parents are very young, many in their teenage years and struggle with the responsibilities of parenting and don't know how to instill values and nurture appropriate behaviour.

Somewhat related is that some identified the need for children to be taught social skills and life skills, including personal hygiene, nutrition and budgeting.

3. Having someone who cares for you and who you are accountable to

Another key difference observed for children who are thriving compared to those who are offending is that they have someone who cares for them and holds them accountable.

A number of people stipulated that the 'significant adult' in a child's life need not be a parents or even a relative. One worker commented that this role was once filled by a good school principal or teacher but that it is not the case anymore.

Justice workers conveyed sadness at the number of young people who never receive a visit during their time in detention. They indicated that the disappointment for children whose parents don't keep promises to either visit or telephone is a key trigger for difficult behaviour. It was suggested there is a need to link these children with someone who takes a positive interest in them and who they feel accountable to.

It was claimed that some adults are teaching children not to raise issues with teachers at school or other authority figures, telling them *'deal with it yourself'*. This was supported by some young people, who indicated that, when faced with problems *'you keep it to yourself'*. Furthermore, they did not know what the school counselors were like because they had never spoken to them. Children need access to an adult that is awake to the sociology of their lives.

One young woman suggested that a motivating factor in reoffending was to return to Orana Detention Centre because it offered 'love' to boys in detention.

4. Staying in school and learning

Completing school and engaging with employment was associated with successful young people. Many people, including senior Police, the Magistrate and community members suggested that engagement in education and employment makes one of the biggest differences to young people's lives. When considering the many children in Dubbo who are thriving, a senior NSW Police Officer commented *'Going to school is a key difference'*.

High rates of suspensions, truancy and early school leavers were cited as reasons that many school-aged children are on the streets and at risk of offending and victimisation. Recognising this, a number of alternative school programs (some called them suspension centres) have been established. These include the Mian School for a small group of very high-needs children, and the Alesco School, an alternative (more flexible) school established in 2014 that operates at the Dubbo PCYC with classes delivered by the Western College. While there was some speculation as to whether some programs resulted in learning outcomes, some Juvenile Justice Workers and an Aboriginal, Child and Family worker indicated that having these young people engaged somewhere is a very good start.

While alternative education programs are clearly needed for some, it is also important that the 20 or so schools in Dubbo develop capacity and strategies to reduce the disengagement of Aboriginal young people from education and to improve their learning outcomes.

Input from young women in a local girls' program for girls who have disengaged from school, demonstrates that an appropriate program can lead to learning outcomes for young people, some of whom self-reported previous contact with Police. Girls in the program stated *'I wouldn't be at school if I wasn't here'*, *'I've changed for the better'* and *'I have a purpose'*. One young woman is progressing into a traineeship, one has a part time job, and one of the young women reported how the program referred her to Doorways (supported accommodation) and other family services.

5. Having positive role models (both adult and peer) and the ability to aspire

Children who are thriving in Dubbo have access to people who are positively contributing to the daily life of the wider community. For others, the influence of negative peers is the trigger for withdrawing from positive activities and participation in crime.

A respected Elder who runs a cultural program for children emphasised the benefits for children who have parents that model positive and productive behaviour. The importance of having parents that work, so that work ethic is *'seen and modeled'*, was emphasised by health workers. The need to role model an alternative to welfare was identified by a number of people.

More broadly though it was suggested that children need access to people who are positive and successful so that they know success is within their reach. Some children reported that connection with role models through programs such as Mulgabirra Girls had a positive impact on their lives. Uncle Ralph, a local Elder, was widely recognised as a positive role model. A number of local people who work with young people, such as Kristy, the Police ACLO who runs the Shine Sistaz program, Lionel who works at Apollo House in East Dubbo, and Robert, who has his own fitness business, were also mentioned as

good role models. Access to those who encourage positive choices will reduce the vulnerability of young people to being groomed by older members of the community to deal in drugs, commit crime or engage in unhealthy relationships.

IPROWD is a transitional program that aims to support Aboriginal people to apply for entry into the NSW Police Academy, for an administrative position with NSW Police or on to other career pathways. It provides an example of a program that encourages positive peer role models by giving kids who want to make a change *'the chance to be with like-minded people'*. The coordinator suggested aligning role modeling with employment would assist young people to have realistic career goals - emphasising that boys becoming an NRL player is not within the reach of all boys.

A justice worker, who previously taught children at risk in TAFE and supported them through NGOs, shared stories of children who had resumed a positive path after connecting with positive cultural role models through an earlier incarnation of Mission Australia's Cultural Leadership program.

6. Being connected and involved

Generally, children in Dubbo who have a good life are children who have a sense of connectedness, either to family, culture, socially or through sport and recreation. Positive connections previously noted above (ie programs and activities, or interacting with positive peers or adults) support young people to transition onto more positive pathways.

When asked for ideas about what would help them stay on a positive pathway, a young man who had previously been in detention and completed rehabilitation talked enthusiastically about vacation and recreation programs that provided him with access to sport and excursions.

What are the 'circuit breakers' that could change a negative trajectory to a positive one?

The elements identified as supporting children in Dubbo to thrive point to a number of potential moments or factors that could either prevent or divert a negative trajectory to a positive one. This section includes community feedback and comments from the team.

1. Identification and addressing learning barriers early

Strategies that support children to sustain school attendance and improve overall education outcomes have high potential as circuit breakers. For many children this requires particular learning needs to be identified and addressed early in their schooling. Concerns were expressed about a perceived over-diagnosis and medication of children rather than using approaches that seek to understand and address their needs and engage them in learning in appropriate ways. Concerns were also raised about the impact of drug and alcohol misuse on unborn children and the consequences of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and other developmental disabilities for children.

There are precedents of schools elsewhere adopting approaches to engaging Aboriginal children in learning by skilling teachers and other workers to understand trauma, helping them to recognise children in need and respond, rather than react to challenging behaviours. Strategies such as yarning circles, where children are encouraged to speak about feelings and goals, aim to ensure that children don't get 'lost' in the school community. Other techniques used by schools are rhythm and repetition (drumbeat, music and dance), which have calming effects and improve children's ability to learn and participate. Art and cultural activities can have a similar impact.

Many schools also provide an effective referral pathway for children and their families by supporting outreach service delivery on the school grounds.

2. Introduction of a sustained positive influence

There is evidence that a well-designed mentoring program in which responsible adults are carefully matched with young people, can be effective. A program that begins at first contact with Police or justice, or while boys are in Orana Detention Centre and continues post their release could offer the benefits of a responsible adult noted earlier. [Shine for Kids](#) runs such a program at Frank Baxter Juvenile Justice Centre on the Central Coast, in the ACT and this program will commence shortly in Kempsey. Recruiting positive mentors from across the region, through a network such as [IPROWD](#) would enable sustained support as boys leave Orana and return to their home communities. Similarly, mentoring for girls could be established through the Shine Sistaz program, Mulgabirra Girls program or Making Tracks.

3. Getting children off the streets

In very practical terms, getting children off the street would reduce the risk of them offending due to boredom, hunger or negative peer influences, and from breaching bail or Juvenile Justice orders. Lack of accommodation choices was identified as a key concern by young men who had successfully completed the Mac River rehabilitation program. Strategies to get kids off the streets include developing transitional housing or intensive family support to build safer and more stable homes (see below).

4. Support for children (and families) from their earliest contact with justice

Discussions suggest a missed opportunity to engage with children and families at their first point of contact with the criminal justice system due to the absence of caseworkers. Children who plead not guilty are not eligible to access casework support which is provided for young people who have pleaded or been found guilty. However this point presents an opportunity to address identified criminogenic risks.

A senior justice representative suggested that there are only five to ten families that account for the vast majority of children's court cases. An intervention point at their initial contact with the court may prevent them progressing to detention and would provide an opportunity to engage with parents, carers and siblings, having a positive flow-on effect. The Aboriginal Legal Service submitted a funding proposal to the Commonwealth's Indigenous Advancement Strategy to employ a caseworker but it was unsuccessful.

5. Targeted intensive support for justice-involved families

Community members and justice workers reinforced research that demonstrates a significant percentage of Aboriginal children in detention have parents who are or have been involved in the justice system. Intensive therapeutic family and parenting support targeted to justice-involved families is a potential means of encouraging many of the elements identified as supporting thriving children – safe homes, positive role models, learning right from wrong, feeling loved and being accountable. There are precedents, such as [Nurse Family Partnerships](#), where 'the interest of the child' has resulted in targeted programs for offending parents and other families facing significant challenges at the prenatal stage.

Western Region Juvenile Justice has formed a partnership with Monash University after successfully applying for a grant from the Australian Research Council. Juvenile Justice and Mission Australia staff have been trained in a collaborative family work model that has skilled them to work with families around identifying problems and how to work through and resolve issues affecting them. Given both agencies have services in other western towns, it has the potential to provide support for families further afield. Pending its evaluation by Monash, further consideration could be given to this program.

6. Drivers' license and instruction

A number of stakeholders, including Police and legal services, echoed the community suggestion that a strategy to reduce driver license offences would decrease the number of young people going into detention and onto adult imprisonment. Barriers to young people obtaining a driver's license included procuring birth certificates and access to supervised driving practice. While schools, Legal Aid Commission and Juvenile Justice all assist young people with obtaining birth certificates, this still remains a challenge for some. Children in school and Orana Detention Centre can access online road rules and practice driver knowledge tests. The Driving Change program does offer access to driving mentors for mandatory driving practice, but anecdotally the program is struggling to attract volunteer driver mentors. There is an opportunity to partner with Driving Change to improve access to driver licenses for young people.

In the current state of play, what is seen to be working and what is not?

There are a plethora of activities and many dedicated people working in a range of ways to try and encourage and support children to stay on or create a positive pathway in Dubbo. Feedback about what is making a positive difference as well as what the barriers to progress are, is detailed below.

What is working for the community?

There are some programs that are considered favourably and are seemingly meeting community needs and expectations. For the most part though, programs were championed by those either involved in, or affiliated with the program, and there were not many programs that appeared to be universally known and/or respected.

1. Widely endorsed programs

Three programs were widely endorsed unprompted.

Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Aboriginal Cultural Camp program

Unanimously praised is a culture camp conducted by Uncle Ralph Naden, a respected local Wiradjuri Elder. Established in the 1990s, it was built with assistance from 18 young men involved with the justice system. Uncle Ralph engages with young Aboriginal men and women who have disengaged from school and had contact with the justice system. The program is focused on 'Yindyamarra' – respect, learning cultural practices, working with attitudes, reconciliation, Black and White relationships, relationships between men and women, respect for property, violence and caring for country. It relies on schools funding children to visit.

Mac River Residential Alcohol and Other Drug Rehabilitation centre

Also unanimously praised is Mac River, funded by Juvenile Justice and managed by Mission Australia. On a property 20 kilometres from Dubbo it provides a three-month (or longer) residential placement for up to seven young men at a time. Many young people exit Orana and enter Mac River. Young men are supported to develop life skills and make positive decisions – they learn nutrition and cooking skills, grow vegetables, receive counseling, have access to a gym and personal training, develop personal hygiene and grooming, engage with services, obtain birth certificates and open bank accounts. Participants are supported to apply for Work and Development Orders to 'work off' fines by undertaking personal development (including rehabilitation). A respected Aboriginal community member is employed to provide cultural guidance and support, with all Aboriginal boys allocated a patch of land to create their own cultural garden for 'time out'. Mac River was referenced very positively by members of the Aboriginal Community Justice Group, the local court Magistrate, Juvenile Justice and Legal Aid, who cited it as an ideal model that could be considered to address the needs of adults in the community.

IPROWD

Previously noted and widely admired, IPROWD has an 85% completion rate (Certificate 3 TAFE).

2. Promising programs

Mulgabirra Girls Engagement Program

The Mulgabirra Girls Engagement Program targets Year 10 girls who have disengaged from school, Dubbo College, Delroy and South Colleges, and offers participants a Certificate 1 in volunteering, employment skills and literacy and promotes self-esteem and confidence. The program boasts high completion rates, improved school attendance and high rates of students progressing into Years 11 and 12.

Shine Sistaz is delivered through Delroy High School by Kristy Knight, the Dubbo Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO). It targets young Aboriginal women disengaged from education and aims to nurture cultural leadership, education, safety and wellbeing. It covers problem solving, drug and alcohol education and the consequences of theft. It is supported by partners including Macquarie Regional Library, Juvenile Justice, local churches, schools and TAFE.

The PCYC's **On Time** program seeks to address the factors that place children at risk of disengaging from school by picking them up in the morning, providing breakfast and sports activities and then transport to school. About 13 children identified as at-risk due to family issues, mostly from Apollo Estate.

Making Tracks program also targets young Aboriginal people disengaged from education as well as those with low literacy levels and those not demonstrating self-responsibility. Successful participants earn a Certificate 2 in Animal Studies, Hospitality and Customer Service with boys also learning basic carpentry. The program is currently delivered by Taronga Zoo from its own resources.

3. Recent improvements in primary and mental health services

Dubbo Regional Aboriginal Health Service opened in late 2014 and is working in partnership with other services. eg. With the Clontarf Program to conduct health assessments for 50 boys engaged in the program. Similarly, Shine Sistaz participants are provided with health assessments and dental health care. Feedback on the primary and mental health support services provided by *Justice Health* for young people detained at Orana was positive.

Headspace commenced in Dubbo in January 2015, offering counseling for mental health and drug and alcohol issues, as well as support for physical and sexual health for young people. Hopefully the service will fill a gap, particularly for young women around issues of substance misuse, mental health and sexual health.

Another relatively new service is **Neami**, a psychosocial health service that offers a modern, residential mental health recovery facility for adults in Dubbo and the Far West. Many of the workers are Aboriginal people and there has been a measurable decrease in the number of people involuntarily committed to hospital since the service commenced. The Aboriginal Community Justice Group suggested Neami could support the families of children in the justice system.

4. Other mentions

Alternative school programs

Previously noted Alesco and Mian Schools were praised by some and questioned by others.

After school and holiday programs

A number of after school and holiday programs were brought up, primarily by the agencies that run them. It was interesting to note the number of activities available, despite suggestions there is *'nothing for kids to do'*

- *PCYC*: structured drop-in activities at their centre and a van to outreach to Apollo Estate
- *Mission Australia*: 'Cultural Leadership Development' targeting different schools on different days of the week and 'culture camps' during holidays
- *The Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre*: weekday after school programs and the Safe Aboriginal Youth (SAY) youth transport and support program, which provides BBQs on Thursday evenings
- *Vacation Care* programs operate at different locations, coordinated by Centacare with participation from PCYC, Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre, Mission Australia and Apollo House. However there is apparently no recurrent funding for holiday programs for kids.

- *The Clontarf Program* has now commenced in Dubbo, engaging boys in football as a means of strengthening life skills, discipline, self-esteem and employment opportunities
- *The Dubbo Youth Foundation* manages a small grants program for children and young people to participate in sporting opportunities
- *Dubbo Council's* Youth Services Officer was referenced positively by a number of community people and agencies representatives as taking a lead role in coordinating programs and activities for young people
- *NSW Sport and Recreation*: various recreation programs, often in partnership with local services

What is not working for the community?

1. Service continuity, coordination and access

The lack of continuity in Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) service provision seriously undermines agency capacity to engage, build trust with and support children and families with multiple needs. The way services are outsourced and funded by the State and Commonwealth Governments is seen as detrimental to quality and continuity. Services are commonly tendered on a three-year basis, and contracts often moved between providers. This destroys continuity and referral pathways, confuses clients and undermines relationships between service providers and clients. This has the greatest impact on 'hard to reach' families with whom it is difficult to engage and build trust with and whose children are most at-risk of entering detention.

The short-term funding cycle creates competition between NGOs for funding, undermining collaboration. This is exacerbated by the recent transition to the Commonwealth's Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), which has seen many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services in Dubbo competing for significantly reduced funding. The comparatively lower salaries and less favorable work conditions offered by NGOs are also seen as undermining continuity in service provision. Jobs with NGOs were sometimes springboards to positions with government or other agencies that offer better wages, conditions and job stability.

Many stakeholders also expressed frustration with a perceived lack of co-ordination across service providers in Dubbo, despite a large number of inter-agency forums and networks. It seems that the many working groups established by different levels of government has resulted in confusion and cynicism about efforts by different parties to co-ordinate services provided by others. While a number of programs were highly regarded, there is a perception that others work in isolation, rather than offer a gateway to comprehensive service referral. Agencies voiced frustration with a lack of interest, co-operation and resource sharing, which in some instances appeared to be the legacy of changed government funding arrangements.

Positively, many stakeholders identified examples of good collaboration across agencies (ie. holiday care as noted). Collaboration and respect was also evident among some of the services that work with young people in the criminal justice system.

Dubbo's exponential population growth creates further challenges in service co-ordination as does children returning post-release to western communities that are reliant on 'satellite services'. The lack of service infrastructure in these communities means children don't get access to counselors and support services, or prescriptions filled and are in environments where drugs, alcohol and criminal behaviour are prevalent and normalised.

2. Cohesive and active leadership

Some speculated that the many different language groups, and number of people moving to Dubbo from other communities as contributing to a perceived lack of community cohesion and leadership. While a number of outstanding community members were recognised for their efforts and positive role-

modeling, some Aboriginal workers in services reported difficulty in getting Elders and other older members of the community to 'step up' and get involved in programs to support young people on positive pathways. A key local Aboriginal organisation advised that they struggle to attract a quorum of members to meetings. Some people attributed this to a general apathy and dominant negative attitude in the community.

3. Service gaps and weaknesses

Rehabilitation facilities for parents and other adults

A widely identified gap is a local alcohol and other drug rehabilitation facility for adults. Orana Haven near Brewarrina or Lyndon House in Orange are the closest options but many are reluctant to relocate. Further, Lyndon House is reluctant to accept adults released from custody. Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre provides outreach and group counseling through a partnership with Lyndon House but this was not seen as adequately meeting the needs.

The Co-operative Legal Service Program (CLSP) Alcohol and Other Drug Mental Health Project Group was formed to develop a proposal for a facility. The long-term goal is a residential facility with aftercare to provide a legitimate option for adult offenders, but an outpatient facility service model has been developed as a first step. Their application for IAS funding to establish the service was unsuccessful.

Accommodation

A lack of safe accommodation in Dubbo is a key factor in youth incarceration. Senior justice representatives indicated that it greatly limits choices for bail. Uniting Care Burnside's 'Doorways' Program brokers emergency accommodation for people aged 16-23 years, but apparently has limited capacity. There is no youth refuge or safe house option for children and young people under 16. Juvenile Justice funds the Joint Support Program (JSP) which provides access to one crisis accommodation bed for young people under their supervision while case managers seek longer-term accommodation.

Reaching vulnerable families

Consultation identified a range of programs designed to support parents and families run by NGOs including Centacare, Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre, Apollo House, Uniting Care Burnside, Dubbo Regional Aboriginal Health Service and the Western Plains Medical Centre Indigenous Health Clinic. While feedback was generally positive, it was observed that those who most need support are either unaware of, or are reluctant to engage with service providers. Many people identified the need for services to go to clients rather than expect them to 'attend'. It was also observed that few programs aim to improve internal family relationships and family functionality.

Ability of the education sector to engage children

Community members and workers across Dubbo voiced frustration with the perceived inability of local schools to manage behavioural issues and foster an interest in learning. Apart from the program and activities already mentioned, the NSW Government funded 'Ochre' program is designed to improve school attendance and outcomes for Aboriginal children. As a recent initiative its impact is yet to be determined. Only Ochre staff mentioned the program.

What could be done to build on existing strengths and fill gaps?

This section details the ideas most commonly suggested by Dubbo people in response to the question:

What do you think would keep more children from offending and reoffending in Dubbo?

Transitional housing

Unsurprisingly, a consistent suggestion was the provision of transitional accommodation for young people who are homeless or rough sleeping, seeking bail, and post-release from detention or Mac River. There were a range of perspectives on appropriate options but given the high needs, any accommodation would require strong social support from a range of service providers.

Another challenge is accommodation for young people who return to communities across the western region post-release. A brokerage model was suggested but given the reliance on satellite services, consistent and sufficient follow-up care is questionable. Others suggested that a central safe accommodation option would benefit some, as it would allow them time to transition to a more positive lifestyle than if they returned immediately to their home community.

Support for better parenting

There was strong support for services that engage families and attempt to improve parenting capacity and strengthen family functioning. One justice worker observed that in some circumstances *'Mum and Dad are on drugs and there's alcohol-related violence in front of the kids. To help the kids you need to deal with the parents'*. With the recognised reluctance of families to access existing family services, safe access points should be identified.

Some community members and child and family workers expressed interest in a family healing model that provided accommodation for children but allowed parents to stay, with support to strengthen parenting. [Tirkandi Inaburra](#) near Griffith, a facility for Aboriginal boys aged 12 to 15 years was cited as an ideal model. There were some stakeholders who suggested that parents would be reluctant to participate or in some instances children would have a better chance of positive outcomes without their parents.

Coordinated case management for all children at court

Previously noted is the opportunity to 'get in early' when children appear at court, especially those pleading guilty and whose criminal histories exclude them from the *Young Offenders Act*. People working in the justice agency suggested *'bringing all the forces to bear in a co-coordinated way'* at that point with one person coordinating multiple services.

Increased post-release support

Currently post-release support is provided by Mission Australia based on targets set by Juvenile Justice who funds it through their Joint Support Program. It was suggested that enhanced support for some young people would be valuable.

Positive role models and mentors

There was strong support for partnering children who lack adequate care with a positive mentor. While there were comments that apathy may limit the number of people willing to participate, many local positive role models were identified who may be willing to act in this role.

Rehabilitation facilities

As noted previously, adult rehabilitation is top of mind. The fact that children from western NSW have to travel to Sydney to access detoxification facilities was also identified as a real barrier.

Programs for boys in detention

While health and wellbeing support for children in detention was well regarded, there was strong support for more activities to strengthen resilience, cultural connection and interaction with strong male Elder role models. Driver's license suggestions were noted previously.

Education 'add-ons' to increase engagement

Discussion focused on increasing access to alternative models rather than improving the capacity of schools. However, there was interest in sustaining a number of community led school education and development programs for young people (Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Cultural Camp, Shine Sistaz, Mulgabirra and Making Tracks). A number of people also emphasised the need for programs that educate children about drugs, particularly ice, and personal safety and respectful relationships.

What signs of collective efficacy could be built on?

Despite perceptions from many stakeholders that there is a lack of service collaboration and coordination in Dubbo, isolated examples of collective efficacy could be drawn from and built on.

The Co-operative Legal Service Delivery Program Partnership

This stands out as a strong example of local collective that has worked to address an identified gap (rehabilitation) for people coming into the criminal justice system. It is a partnership, whose members include the Aboriginal Community Justice Group, Legal Aid, the Aboriginal Legal Service, Binaal Billa Family Violence Prevention Legal Service, Housing NSW and all key non-government service providers in the region.

Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Aboriginal Cultural Camp program

As noted, this was built by a group of young men involved with the criminal justice system. ATSIC provided funds for the shower and toilets, a group of visiting Magistrates donated funds for the installation of lighting so the site could be used for overnight camping. At present, some schools in cover the costs for their students, both boys and girls, to participate.

IPROWD

IPROWD is a great example of a partnership program that was conceived and championed by a local Aboriginal man that has now been expanded to nine locations across NSW. It is delivered through a partnership between TAFE, NSW Police, the Commonwealth Government and the Big Brother mentoring program. The partners were engaged because they can all play a part in addressing the many barriers identified for regional Aboriginal people in accessing vocational education and employment. It is supplemented by the Employment Related Accommodation (ERA) program (NSW Aboriginal Housing), through which families can access affordable housing if they relocate to undertake vocational education or employment. 100 Aboriginal people into the NSW Police Academy will continue to strengthen Police and community relationships.

Recommendations for philanthropic action

The opportunities to 'shift the dial' of children's incarceration in Dubbo appear to be:

1. Transitional housing, and
2. Intensive family support for identified families.

These are complex and costly undertakings, requiring strong and multiple local partnerships and time to bring to fruition. If we are to explore either of these, a staged approach is recommended to allow an immediate response to community and the time to work on how we might catalyse action on the more complex longer-term opportunities.

Short term – responding to the community

Grants program for high potential local activities

A targeted local grants program, with a commitment of three to five years, could provide supplementary support to the identified high potential activities. It could also set criteria to encourage new activities based on the aspects identified as helping children to thrive in Dubbo.

Care should be taken to ensure any investment supplements, rather than replaces existing funding.

A selection committee of local champions could start to build relationships required for more strategic work.

Build on specific existing programs

Explore the feasibility of supporting Yalmambirra Boogijoon Doolin Cultural Camp to tailor a program for young people in and post release from detention. Some form of exchange or partnership with [BackTrack](#), which has a different work readiness focus but has been highly successful in reducing youth incarceration rates in Armidale, might be beneficial.

Fill a non-complex service gap

Support [Driving the Change](#) to expand to young people engaged in other programs or in Orana.

Support [Shine for Kids' Stand as One](#) mentoring for children in detention and post-release.

Medium-term – strengthening the existing system

Coordinated casework from first contact

Further consideration could be given to opportunities to improve case management and service co-ordination for children and families at the first court appearance. The Cooperative Legal Service Delivery Program Partnership and Aboriginal Legal Service are potential partner agencies to engage in further local discussion regarding this strategy.

Cross-sector training 'package'

A package of relevant training options could be developed and offered to schools, youth services, Police and others interested in learning about identifying and responding to children's needs. Topics could include trauma-informed practice, Love Bites, promoting positive, respectful relationships, and Seasons of Healing, designed to support Aboriginal children to heal from the grief and loss associated with death, parental incarceration and other causes of family separation.

Broad-scale mentoring

Developing a community mentoring program to supplement existing programs and for children in Orana that continues once they are released is an option. Partnering with IPROWD would be a good avenue as it has alumni of Aboriginal men and women on successful pathways across western NSW.

Discussion could be held with Juvenile Justice, IPROWD, Shine Sistaz Program and Mulgabirra Girls Program to explore interest and with Shine for Kids for advice.

Long-term

Transitional housing

Any effort to reduce the number of children entering detention may fail if the issue of accommodation is not addressed. Preliminary discussion with representatives of NSW Department of Family and Community Services suggests a willingness to discuss this issue further. The success of the Employment Related Accommodation Program suggests the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office is a potential partner. The Dubbo Local Aboriginal Land Council owns property and could also be approached as a potential partner if a fixed 'bricks and mortar' model is pursued.

Philanthropy could convene discussions with community, governments, NGOs, business operators and others interested to explore solutions. Such a project requires a coalition of strong local leaders to pursue support, funding and partnerships, develop a business model and manage the service.

Intensive family support for identified families

'Breaking the cycle' of intergenerational incarceration requires intensive and sustained family support for justice-involved families. Further discussions in Dubbo are required to understand the current service landscape and the opportunities to build on. Nurse Family Partnerships were noted previously; US analysis of over 50 evidenced interventions (Washington State Institute for Public Policy) found this model has the greatest cost-benefit return in terms of reducing crime. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)'s [right@home program](#) is developing an Australian model and evidence-base. [Newpin](#) is another intensive program in Australia with excellent results and was one of two interventions selected for the NSW Government's Social Benefit Bond trial. The ANTS program, pending evaluation by Monash University could be an existing option on which to build.