

25 April 2022

Hon Peter Foster MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council Committee Office
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

By email: env@parliament.wa.gov.au.

Dear Mr Foster

Submission - Petition No. 047 – Crime and anti-social behaviour across the Kimberley

As Principal Petitioner for the Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Across the Kimberley Petition, I appreciate the opportunity to provide further information.

I have lived in the Kimberley my entire life, operate a large construction business and have a strong civic role as President of the Shire of Broome, Board member of the Kimberley Regional Group and WALGA Kimberley Zone. The rise in crime and anti-social behaviour is permeating every aspect of life in the Kimberley and is having a very real impact on our region's economy, liveability and long term sustainability.

In 2020 the Shire of Broome undertook a survey with safety and security identified by residents as a high priority. Crime and antisocial behaviour – violence, drunkenness, all night parties, itinerants, youth crime and juvenile delinquency, including theft, vandalism and rock throwing, Alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence were key focus areas of concern.

Later in 2020 the Shire ran a Community Crime Forum which was attended by over 400 residents – the capacity of the room.

By December 2021, the Kimberley experienced record levels of crime including offences against the person in categories such as Family Assault and Non-Family Assault. Crimes against property were also at record levels including property damage and burglary. Whilst statistics paint a picture, it is the escalation rate that has left our communities reeling along with the sheer senseless nature of the crimes.

The most obvious starting point is the scourge of social media challenges which have seen underage, unlicensed drivers terrorising communities and targeting police cars with many vehicles severely damaged and officers hospitalised. Trucks are also targeted with the extremely dangerous game of throwing rocks as the road trains roll across the single lane bridge across the Fitzroy River, again resulting in driver injury. Tragically games of "chicken," running out of the dark into the path a triple road train, involve children as young as six, and significant damage has been done to public property by gangs of children where the oldest is ten.

Crime has escalated, with tourists attacked and their cars stolen, putting the reputation of one of our major industries at risk. The situation in the east Kimberley, particularly in Kununurra, has deteriorated to the extent that businesses report that they cannot attract staff and they are finding insurance unavailable or unaffordable. Individual businesses can experience multiple break-ins in a single night, with reports of the same business targeted over 10 times in a month.

The Kimberley is a region with some of the most socially disadvantaged people in Australia. Educational outcomes are poor and job opportunities are highly constrained in some locations. Domestic violence is rampant and children are often unsupervised at night, escaping to the streets to avoid the dysfunction at home.

Children are hungry, bored and experience conditions so bad on a daily basis that any "consequences" that are delivered through the courts are not seen as a deterrent. Indeed, being sent to Banksia Hill Detention Centre can be seen as a badge of honour which gains access to more senior youth gangs.

The outlook is grim. The police are active, however both youth and adult offenders are released and reoffend, sometimes the following day. The police are tired. The community is frustrated and afraid.

It is against this backdrop of escalating and unprecedented levels of crime, anti-social behaviour, acts of violence, intimidation and destruction of property that the Shires, the Kimberley Regional Group (KRG) and other stakeholders have been trying to negotiate our way through bureaucracy to find solutions. Currently the only obvious response has been an uplift in police numbers but this is not a situation where increasing arrests provides a long term, sustainable solution.

There are some excellent programs which have been funded over the last 12 months and I commend them, however it is clear that there is currently no integrated, interagency plan to address the complex issues that have led to the epidemic of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Given the scale of crime and anti-social behaviour being experienced in the Kimberley, it is essential that the government collectively acknowledges the gravity of the situation and organises an urgent and adequately resourced deployment of new solutions and the expansion of existing programs where they have proven success in addressing the crisis.

Housing, education, parenting programs, drug and alcohol education along with safe houses (to enable children to escape violence), on-country youth justice facilities and programs to reduce boredom and depression are part of the picture. Addressing child neglect, including food insecurity, are also essential components of a pathway forward. Another vital aspect is that the connection to country and culture is acknowledged in the development of solutions as the Kimberley is not a homogenous region.

We are in crisis. Our elders, who would historically provide leadership and stability, are now ageing and many of those that would be stepping into those roles have succumbed to drugs and alcohol. The Kimberley Regional Group has campaigned tirelessly on targeted alcohol management and continue to plead with the State Government to introduce the promised legislation to empower the Banned Drinkers Register to target problem drinkers. I would like to highlight this as an urgent, priority action.

We also need a custodial plan for adults and juveniles that is focused on rehabilitation and the reduction in recidivism.

It is important to remember that it is a relatively small number of youths and young adults that are causing the mayhem in our region. Unfortunately the growing attraction to the gangster culture of the United States may lead to more young people proceeding down a path of crime and anti-social behaviour. We must reverse the trend and we need the State Government to be an active participant in the solution.

Yours sincerely

Harold Tracey