

Media Statement

September 16, 2022

Urgent action required regarding use of police watch houses to hold children in Queensland.

The Youth Advocacy Centre is extremely concerned with the significant number of children in Queensland being held in police watch houses around the state.

Adult watch houses are not a place for children particularly those as young as 10. They do not have the capacity or facilities to adequately care for children and should not be used as an alternative to youth detention centres.

Unfortunately, this is a prolonged issue that YAC and other community groups have been calling attention to for over 30 years.

The use of watchhouses breaches:

- the QPS Operations Manual;
- the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC); and
- the Principles of Youth Justice in the Schedule to the Act.

We are aware of children as young as 10 being held in adult watch houses. Some children have been held there for up to 30 days at a time.

These facilities are severely inadequate for children to stay in – we are particularly concerned about:

- Very limited facilities and opportunities for visits by family;
- No facilities for exercise or age-appropriate activities;
- No access to health supports or education;
- Severe mental health impacts from confinement in a watchhouse cell;
- Children being held in close proximity to adult prisoners;
- QPS staff not being trained to deal with children in this situation; and
- Insufficient hygiene standards.

Many children in this situation are victims of abuse, violence, or neglect, and are deserving of support to assist in healing and prevent continued offending.

The traumatic experience of a watch house stay is very damaging to children and does not address criminal behaviour but instead exacerbates it.

In many instances children are being placed in the watch house because of a lack of space in youth detention centres. However, 85 per cent of children in detention are on remand (detained prior to their trial). We need to address this number and use detention for convictions alone.

At the moment, the Queensland public is not provided with statistics of how many children are being held in watch houses. In the 2020-21 financial year there were between 53 and 99 distinct young people aged between 10-18 years in court-ordered custody in watch houses each month¹.

YAC are calling for several changes and considerations to be made, including:

- An immediate end to using adult watch houses to detain children, except in emergency situations;
- Introducing new criteria for emergency only use of watch houses for children and for under 24 hours only (when this happens, new protocols around care required for children must be met – connection with family, community, health, nutrition, mental health, social needs);
- Greater transparency around the number of children being held in watch houses;
- Reviewing of bail conditions and increased use of community programs as alternatives;
- Recognising that a large proportion of young offenders are significantly affected by drugs and/or have mental health problems (usually related to significant trauma in their lives), creating the need for a major drug rehabilitation and mental health facility for children in Queensland;
- If detention is required, it must be in a fit-for-purpose youth detention centre, specifically designed to cater to the needs of children and young people;
- Raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years.

YAC also notes that building more youth detention centres is not an appropriate solution. Building and running centres is not only costly, but research also indicates it will not reduce the number of repeat offenders. The outdated use of detention and watch houses simply perpetuates further offending - the community and young people deserve much better.

If Queensland continues to hold large number of children in detention, a review should be undertaken of the cultural operation of those centres to review the effectiveness, similar to the review undertaken in Tasmania.

Jurisdictions around the world are closing their youth detention centres or significantly reducing the population inside by taking approaches to divert children from the youth justice system. Queensland needs to learn from these successes and bring our system up to date as a matter of urgency.

YAC has compiled more detail on this issue in our paper addressing watch houses, released in 2019: [Orange Paper #1: The use of Queensland watch houses to hold children.](#)

1. Childrens Court of Queensland, Annual Report 2020-21, Table 37, <https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/tableoffice/tabledpapers/2021/5721T2116.pdf>