

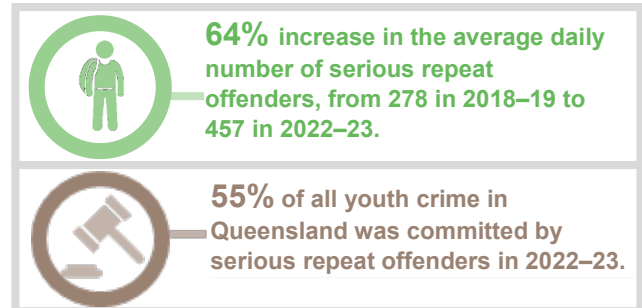
Report summary

Youth crime is a complex problem that has touched the lives of many Queenslanders. The underlying causes of youth crime are multi-faceted. Many young offenders have poor health, including mental health issues and behavioural disorders; many are disengaged from education and employment. A whole-of-system approach is needed to address this complex problem.

Most young offenders only commit a small number of offences and are diverted away from Queensland’s youth justice system (the system). However, a small proportion reoffend and commit serious offences.

In this report, we focus on these serious repeat offenders, who are a threat to the safety of our communities.

Figure A
Statistics on serious repeat offenders



Note: The number of serious repeat offenders is based on the Department of Youth Justice’s serious repeat offender index.

Source: Queensland Audit Office using information provided by the Department of Youth Justice.

System leadership has improved, but needs to be more effective

Leadership has improved in recent years, but further work is required to make it more effective. Constant government restructures (5 over the past 7 years), legislative changes, and instability in leadership positions within entities have hindered efforts to reduce crime by serious repeat offenders.

The government has improved oversight and coordination by establishing system-wide governance committees, including the Community Safety Cabinet Committee, the Youth Justice Taskforce Senior Officers Reference Group (the taskforce), and multi-agency collaborative panels. The taskforce and panels have been a positive step, providing an effective platform for entities to coordinate and prioritise their responses. However, their effectiveness is diminished by a high proxy attendance and, at times, a lack of action to address key challenges across the system, some of which are long standing. These challenges include the lack of capacity in detention centres and the over-representation of First Nations youth in the system. While these committees provide oversight and coordination, there is a need to define who has overall responsibility and accountability for the youth justice system. The Department of Youth Justice (the department) leads the government’s response to youth justice, but as a stand-alone entity it does not have authority to make decisions across the system.

Better system-wide analysis is required to inform investment

The government has invested heavily in a range of rehabilitation, support, and community-based programs to address crime by young offenders. This investment would be strengthened by implementing stronger planning and analysis at both the system and entity levels. Entities need to work together at a system level to ensure there is adequate investment in services that protect children from those factors that put children at risk of offending. These services may include community, health, housing, education, and others. Similarly, the department needs to strengthen its analysis to ensure it is investing in the right programs, at the right locations.

The department, who is responsible for funding entities that deliver programs that rehabilitate young offenders, could not demonstrate that it was regularly testing the market. This increases the risk that its investments do not achieve value for money or meet the needs of young offenders. Contract management practices also need to be strengthened to support better outcomes for young offenders.

Entities need to better implement their new youth justice strategy

The government had a comprehensive state strategy, *Working Together Changing the Story: Youth Justice Strategy 2019–2023*, which expired at the end of 2023. However, it did not implement it effectively. This included only developing and implementing an action plan for part of the strategy, not for the full period. The department has drafted its new youth justice strategy and needs to address these gaps when implementing its new strategy. The Queensland Police Service (QPS) needs to finalise its own youth justice strategy and ensure it aligns with the state’s strategy.

Greater system-wide evaluation is needed to determine if the government’s actions are reducing crime by serious repeat offenders and improving community safety. The Department of the Premier and Cabinet’s new system evaluation responsibilities aim to address this gap.

More can be done to monitor and rehabilitate serious repeat offenders

Entities undertake a range of activities to address youth crime in high-risk areas and provide better support to communities. This includes the Queensland Government’s youth co-responder teams, which fill an important gap in services and ensure 24/7 support to young people across the state. While QPS is increasing its police presence in communities where there are high rates of youth crime, it can strengthen its processes for checking that young offenders comply with their bail conditions.

QPS and the department do not have a consistent way of identifying those young offenders with the highest risk of reoffending. These different approaches are resulting in entities identifying different cohorts. This increases the risk that some high-risk offenders may miss out on getting the rehabilitation or case management they need to address their offending behaviour.

The department has designed a suite of programs to rehabilitate young offenders, including serious repeat offenders. These are based on, or informed by, evidence and better practice. However, it is difficult to determine their effectiveness due to poor data capture and a lack of independent evaluation and monitoring against outcomes.

The young offenders who are in detention are not always getting the rehabilitation or education they need to address their offending behaviour.

This is partly due to Queensland’s youth detention centres often being locked down because of staff shortages, safety incidents, and other factors. Cleveland Youth Detention Centre had the highest staff shortages when compared to the other centres. The department has implemented a range of strategies to address these staff shortages at Cleveland Youth Detention Centre, including using a greater variety of platforms to attract applicants. While it has increased staffing levels, additional staff are still required for the centre to operate effectively and avoid lockdowns.

18% (9) of the 50 serious repeat offender files we sampled had no records of any rehabilitation programs being delivered to them to stop their re-offending.

The department needs to better manage a young offender’s transition from detention to the community

More can be done to support young offenders leaving detention. Leaving detention is a particularly susceptible time for serious repeat offenders. While the department provides case management support to young offenders before and after they leave detention, its primary approach to managing their transition from detention back into the community is its 72-hour plans. These plans are not based on evidence and the department could not explain the rationale for only planning for the first 72 hours after a young offender’s release. We found 72 hours may not be sufficient, and a transition plan covering a longer period is needed. The department did not always prepare a 72-hour plan for serious repeat offenders leaving detention, and the quality and consistency of them varied significantly.

Our audit scope

Our audit focused on the work entities are doing to address crime by high-risk and serious repeat offenders, given the impact they have on our communities. We assessed whether youth justice strategies and programs are effective in reducing crime by serious repeat offenders and improving community safety. We acknowledge the significant work entities do to identify at-risk young people and intervene early in their lives. This work, in areas such as education, health, and housing, is critical to deter young people from entering the system. This report does not assess or conclude specifically on these areas.