

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 21 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Crime Prevention; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary, and

Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Police, Racing, Victims and Coordination, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones now be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Crime Prevention the Honourable Anthony Carbines, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will start asking questions. Your time starts now.

Visual presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks very much, Chair and committee members. I would like to start by again acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past and present. The Allan Labor government recognises that reducing crime requires a whole-of-system approach. We understand that we have to strike the right balance between holding those accountable for their actions and continuing to invest in the reforms and services to help people at risk in our community. We have got to divert people away from the justice system and make sure that Victorians not only are safe but feel safe. That is why not only is our government partnering with Victoria Police to disrupt and deter crime through targeted operations, we are also investing in innovative local initiatives and early intervention programs to tackle the root causes of crime.

Since 2015 our government has invested some \$100 million in 948 crime prevention projects across Victoria, with 69 initiatives currently underway across the state. All our funding grants and projects are publicly listed on the Community Crime Prevention Victoria website. Much of the funding is supporting young people through early intervention initiatives and complements investment in recent budgets of some \$20 million in Victoria Police led early intervention initiatives to tackle youth offending in the main. Our government invested \$13.64 million over three years to continue the youth crime prevention program to help keep young people on track and away from the criminal justice system. Since the program began in 2016 nearly 6000 young people have been supported, and that includes 2140 young people who have received intensive one-on-one support and 3858 young people who have engaged in prosocial activities like sports and employment opportunities to help people build social and community connections and help young people stay on track. This year the program is being reviewed to inform its future directions, including options to expand. This would allow more young people to receive early intervention and access the services they need.

The expansion will also support other major reforms designed to divert young people away from the justice system, including raising the age of criminal responsibility. It will build on what is already working well in the program, including making sure young people get the support they really need for as long as they need the flexible support, ensuring that families and young people's support networks are also supported and working

with local relationships to address drivers of offending. A good example is the Ballarat youth crime prevention project delivered by Berry Street, a great program that brings together a range of different partners to address the unique factors that can contribute to a young person's offending. The partners coordinate referrals for the multi-agency support team coordinator. That ensures that there is a good understanding of the current and past support involvement for the young people involved, reducing their need to tell their story multiple times and reducing the risk of offending. So far Berry Street has helped more than 118 young people in Ballarat.

More broadly, the government has invested in strong partnerships with communities across Victoria to tackle the causes of crime where it is most needed. We know that the best outcomes are achieved when government and local communities work together. Work is also continuing to support nine empowering communities partnerships across the state. Delivering empowering communities grants supports local communities to design and lead innovative local initiatives to address the causes of crime and improve perceptions of safety in local communities. Our investment has funded 55 local initiatives that support a range of issues and groups. These programs are taking place in communities where data has identified a high need for targeted crime prevention and early intervention investments. They include Ballarat, Shepparton, Melton, Dandenong and Knox, among others. Those initiative are delivering real outcomes and making an impact in these communities.

\$4.28 million is also being invested in our trusted partners Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch until 30 June 2025, and that funding supports these partners to work with government and Victoria Police to tackle crime and increase community safety. The government's investment in crime prevention is helping to build a safer community for all Victorians, reduce offending and, most importantly, support people, particularly young people, to avoid contact with the justice system. For example, nearly 6000 young people have received support or engaged with prosocial activities through the youth crime prevention program since 2016. Crime Stoppers received 110,000 contacts in 2023–24, supporting more than 1080 arrests. Neighbourhood Watch has grown its membership to 4500 members across 212 groups and is continuing to deliver campaigns aimed at fostering community safety. We have some 1300 community members in crime prevention activities, forums and events to foster local partnerships and raise awareness. Thanks very much, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The first 8 minutes is going to go to our Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Considering the budget shows for 2024–25 a 46 per cent reduction in the output for the related portfolio – that is due in part, I guess, to transfers of initiatives to other outputs – has there been an actual reduction to the crime prevention portfolio budget?

Anthony CARBINES: You are right to say that there has been a transfer from the community crime prevention output to the advocacy and human rights and victim support output of our preventing youth crime through early intervention initiative. That is an accurate reflection on things. In relation to reductions in our funding for crime prevention, no. What I would say to you is that there are two other elements. One, on that 45 per cent variance that you talk to, there was the countering violent extremism program, which in particular was a \$52 million program that related to capital expenditure; for example, the bollards that we have placed in many CBD locations. When you deliver some of those infrastructure projects – and it is a pretty insignificant amount of money – and those projects conclude, then you do not redo them, so they expire. There are also some crime prevention initiatives that are concluding programs. They have been resourced over a period of years and are fixed term, and when they conclude they do not continue. Outside of that we still have some 69 crime prevention programs which are continuing to provide services in the community, on top of \$100 million in crime prevention program funding that has serviced some 950-odd programs since we have been in office. This year's budget also invests some \$6.6 million over four years in our youth crime prevention and early intervention programs. That picks up on the \$13.5 million in last year's budget, which takes us to a \$20 million contribution for these past two years to embed, I suppose, those important works that are delivered by those youth crime prevention projects.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Secretary, how many staff are assigned to the community care prevention unit as of today?

Kate HOUGHTON: I do not have the exact FTE for that particular unit, but in – did you term that the community crime prevention unit?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes. The FTE I can get to you, but through our restructure of the department last year that group was merged into a broader policy coordination group within the department.

Nick McGOWAN: How many people in the department at the moment are focused on community crime prevention?

Kate HOUGHTON: I do not have the exact figure. Do you have that?

Anthony CARBINES: Not off the top of my head.

Kate HOUGHTON: I can get that on notice.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Minister, you touched on this in respect to the initiatives that have ceased. Are you able to detail all of those initiatives that have ceased as part of the 46 per cent that I was referring to before?

Anthony CARBINES: I think I touched on earlier that our youth crime prevention programs are on the website too, aren't they, the ones that are resourced. For the ones that are concluded, there would be a record and a list as they go up?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: The evaluations are published on the community crime prevention website.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, but also a list of the ones that we have resourced and –

Nick McGOWAN: Rather than us guessing, perhaps you can provide that list, just so we are not –

Anthony CARBINES: That would be my reference list as a public document, but absolutely I am happy to provide you with our – go on, you were saying –

Nick McGOWAN: The list of those that have been discontinued.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, I will provide you with all of them that we have funded. There will be some that have concluded because they are lapsed programs and they have concluded their funding agreement, and then there are those that are continuing. We can provide that to you.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, I suppose this is one for you. Why are there no new output initiatives relating to the portfolio for the 2024–25 budget?

Anthony CARBINES: I am not quite clear on where you are referring to.

Nick McGOWAN: In the 2024–25 budget, so we are talking about new output initiatives – new initiatives.

Anthony CARBINES: I would say that our particular investment in this year's budget would be, over four years, the \$6.63 million on budget paper 3, page 66, particularly in Wyndham and Brimbank, to support more suburbs in regional Victoria and particularly to support our young people at risk of youth offending. In addition, the budget provided \$650,000 over four years to support Westjustice to continue its engagement and delivery of its programs in Melbourne's west within the community sector legal support and early intervention services initiative. Beyond those investments that are direct there are also our programs that are outlined in crime prevention through other outputs in police, corrections, youth justice and within the broader department. So while we run our crime prevention programs, we are not the only part of government that invests across DJCS in corrections and youth justice with police that benefit young people.

Nick McGOWAN: By the department's own description on page 159 of budget paper 3, the advocacy, human rights and victim support output does not cover crime prevention initiatives. If that is the case, why was funding from crime prevention initiatives transferred here?

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, that is good question, and I am going to ask the Secretary to speak to that. It is a little bit out of my purview to move those things around because they do come to us in machinery-of-government changes. I am sure the Secretary would like to outline that one for you, Deputy Chair.

Kate HOUGHTON: Within the departmental restructure the money follows the people. How we have constructed the department, it has moved from the specific crime prevention piece to that broader policy coordination. That is how, through the accounting of the budget rules, it has moved to that other output group.

Anthony CARBINES: Good question, though.

Nick McGOWAN: Can the minister have that back, and I can ask on his behalf?

Kate HOUGHTON: The money has not gone, it has just moved to another –

Nick McGOWAN: Oh, that is good news. Is that a yes for the minister?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, Minister, your money is still there.

Nick McGOWAN: We can redirect that back to crime prevention.

Anthony CARBINES: I have still got it; it is just sitting in a different place.

Kate HOUGHTON: It is just different accounting techniques.

Anthony CARBINES: It does not necessarily reflect in the budget papers in that way.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, you referred to the youth crime prevention program expanding, potentially. Do you know when you will have a date for when that decision is made around that program?

Anthony CARBINES: What one is that, sorry?

Nick McGOWAN: You referred in the presentation to the youth crime prevention program and its expansion.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: So consideration for expanding the program – is there a timeline that you have for that in terms of other grants or programs that you propose to implement?

Anthony CARBINES: Well, some of our youth crime prevention program expansion is that \$6.6 million that we have outlined in the budget, and there will be further investments and evaluation as we roll through that expansion. There has been some \$40 million in the youth crime prevention program funding in recent years. Those programs are evaluated, but you will see probably over the course of the funding that we have provided both in this budget and last year a continued rollout of those crime prevention programs.

Nick McGOWAN: Some of the main areas of activity that the portfolio refers to are preventing crime, addressing local crime issues and countering violent extremism. How does your portfolio report on the success or failure of those activities year on year?

Anthony CARBINES: Some of the determinations we have made on our programs have also been based on data that we have had around where crime has been significant around young people in particular. You will have seen our investments moving to Shepparton, to Brimbank, Melton. Some of the places that we have chosen to increase our funding and allocate it have been based on where the crime statistics data has demonstrated there is the greatest need. We will evaluate and continue to evaluate the effectiveness of those programs, but we have tried to deploy additional resources where the crime stats have indicated that it is needed.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, Secretary and department. It was great to see your presentation in particular around the youth crime prevention program and the almost 6000 people that that has supported already. I am just hoping you could talk to the programs that are funded through this particular line item, and I am always pleased to hear about Wyndham because we have got lots of young people and lots of young people who really appreciate the support.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. Our government has invested some \$13.5 million over the past three years in the youth crime prevention program. Community-led initiatives help young people address the causes of offending in their own lives through access to tailored individual case management. This year the government will increase our investment by \$4.6 million. They are vital projects. In fact they are some of the more important projects in the crime prevention portfolio because they are also specifically designed to work with and support some of our most at-risk young people in the community. The YCPP initiatives work with young people aged 10 to 24. Over 2000 young people have received intensive one-on-one support through YCPP. It has also provided additional support, as you touched on, through group support sessions and the like to nearly 6000 young people.

We know that the drivers of crime are often complex, particularly for young people. In the majority of cases where young people are participating in antisocial behaviour or committing offences, often at the lower end, it is something that they do age out of. However, we also know there is a small number of young people that are committing more serious offences and a disproportionate number of offences, so the youth crime prevention program initiatives provide this intensive support to help those young people build fulfilling lives for themselves and reduce some of the harm that is caused by that crime.

The program currently operates in 14 locations, providing intensive support to those who have demonstrated risk of contact or further contact with the criminal justice system. Our approach has been to partner with community organisations that can tailor the projects to suit the needs of local communities, with the aim of preventing crime by addressing its root causes for some of our more vulnerable young people. The approach is something we have incorporated since day one of these projects. The government worked with the project areas over six months to support the community-based project design for the grant fund so that projects were reflective of actual needs of the local community.

One great example of the success of the project is the Broadmeadows Community Youth Justice Alliance. The government has provided some \$350,000 in investment in this innovative program that provides young people and their families living in the Broadmeadows area access to holistic support services. Banksia Gardens Community Services leads that project. It is a program that also partners with other organisations and agencies, such as Jesuit Social Services, Headspace, Melbourne Victory, Northern Community Legal Centre, FMC counselling and family mediation, Victoria Police and YSAS, to provide a holistic support for young people. The project provides wraparound supports by bringing together and coordinating a broad group of existing local services, ensuring each referred person receives the services they need to get back on track. This also extends to family support and at-risk siblings. Banksia Gardens provides intensive case management to participants in Banksia Gardens public housing estate and other areas across the City of Hume. That includes specialist services such as counselling, medication, drug and alcohol, legal, employment and educational support. Young people are supported through group programs and diversion activities, and since its commencement the project has supported over 440 young people.

Mathew HILAKARI: Fantastic. That sounds like a really great program. I am just hoping you could go through how we know that these programs are successful and what those measures of success are.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. It goes to some of the queries that the Deputy Chair went to earlier. My department has undertaken an evaluation of the first four years of the program, published in March 2022. The evaluation found that the YCPP was delivering some very positive outcomes, so let us go to those. Around the entire program there was a marked reduction of 29 per cent in offending by young people – pretty amazing statistics – and for this program, which works with some of our most disadvantaged young people in Victoria, a reduction of this size is a huge achievement. It is an absolute testament to all the providers connected with the youth crime prevention program. We also saw an impressive drop in the severity of the offending when it did occur – a 24 per cent reduction in serious offending. More remarkably I think is that of the at-risk cohort that have been referred to the program only 13 per cent offended post program. So we are reducing offending and we are reducing the seriousness of that offending, and also there are those significant numbers who are not offending again once they leave the program.

It is important to note that it is a lot more than just reducing offending. As I touched on, it means giving people the tools and resources to engage with employment, education, family and community in healthy and productive ways. For instance, in Brimbank we saw the highest level of employment gain post program across the state. In Latrobe we saw significantly improved engagement in schools, and Frankston had the highest

increase in community connectedness, so across the board an impressive improvement in participant engagement: more than 27 per cent improvement in engagement in education, 36 per cent around training, more than 17 per cent of participants gained employment. So from a cohort of young and vulnerable people there are critical figures that go to show that not only are we preventing crime, we are really making a difference in the lives of young Victorians who got off track. There is an overwhelming 95 per cent of participants that have decreased the risk factors they were facing from substance abuse to psychological distress. While through the program we have seen positive change in those drivers that could push someone towards offending in their lives, more importantly we made real change to the lives of some of Victoria's most disadvantaged young people. What is also clear is that the longer young people stay engaged with the program, the better the results are. Prolonged support of longer than six months produced better results for a longer time of preventing offending and increasing the engagement of participants.

I would also like to note the program's strong alignment with our government's other initiatives. Our youth strategy, the youth justice strategic plan and our youth crime prevention and early intervention project all place a strong emphasis on early intervention and those wraparound supports and evidence-informed models of care which this program is offering across the locations that it serves. The government is committed to ensuring that we intervene early to prevent involvement with the criminal justice system. That is what we are doing with this program. We are keen to build on its fantastic success over the next two years with the opportunity to achieve even more across the youth crime prevention program.

Mathew HILAKARI: I think it is really great that we are keeping communities safer but also improving opportunities for young people, particularly that engagement with work and education which is so important. I was just wondering if you have got any other case studies or individual examples that you might be able to share.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, I do. Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The evaluation included a few case studies that demonstrate the youth crime prevention program has helped vulnerable people turn lives around and get back on track. One case study that stood out to me in particular was the case of Brett, who was supported by our Pivot program. He is a 23-year-old proud Aboriginal man with a long traumatic history of family separation, having witnessed his mother being arrested at the age of five and his father being incarcerated for most of his life for family violence offences. As a result Brett also had limited contact with his siblings; he was involved with child protection. He was referred to one of our youth crime prevention programs, Pivot being that program, as he was on a community correction order for family violence offences dated back to 2012. The Pivot worker took on a family inclusive practice, had sessions with Brett and his current partner and on occasions with his grandfather. Part of these sessions was to focus on his goals and help him feel more connected to the community. Brett really wanted to find a good job, develop positive social connections, work on his identity, have housing stability and make better positive decisions.

The Pivot worker supported Brett in obtaining two employment opportunities. However, they were not sustainable for Brett at the time. With a third employment opportunity Brett flourished and remained employed full time. The Pivot worker linked Brett in with a local football club where he has made new friends and developed a great relationship with the coach. Through this program Brett has since had stable accommodation where he is living with his partner. He is in a positive head space and has had great community supports. He continues to work with the Pivot worker to help support him with his judicial appointments and decision-making skills, but as we know, young people involved in the justice system have complex histories and this project gave Brett the opportunity to stay on the right track with access to consistent support. I would invite any members of the committee who are interested in more stories about how our youth crime prevention program can and has helped vulnerable young people to read our evaluation report, which is available online.

Mathew HILAKARI: I have seen where that is available online, so that is really great, and I encourage other members of the committee to take that up. Well done to Pivot and to Brett as well. I just want to take you, in the limited time that we have left, to the empowering communities program and the importance of partnering with local communities. I know the engagement in the Wyndham area with the Huddle, Youth Activating Youth and Westjustice has been great, but I was also wondering if this partnership approach is something that you use across the entire portfolio.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. I can say that in particular our government set a clear and long-term whole-of-government approach to working with these Victorian communities and stakeholders to

address the risk factors of offending: intervene early and prevent crime before it occurs. We have backed that up with our investment of \$100 million in crime prevention since we were elected in 2014, and that crime prevention strategy, released in June 2021, sets a very clear approach for government. It aims to drive and coordinate action to prevent crime by addressing known risk factors for offending. We have seen that through the critical component of the broader service system reforms that aim to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable people and the Victorian community. The strategy consists of three action areas: empowering and investing in communities to implement local solutions; enhancing and connecting support for people in communities in need; and evidence and impact for effective and innovative approaches. We believe that local communities are best positioned to understand local crime and safety issues and implement effective solutions to those problems.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi. I have just got a couple of questions on crime prevention, but before I start those I was just going to check: you are still the Minister for Crime Prevention, right? That is the title? Okay. The reason I ask is that on the Department of Justice and Community Safety website under the organisation structure, ‘crime prevention’ has been removed as a portfolio area. The remaining listed portfolios – Attorney-General, corrections, emergency services et cetera – are all there; they still line up with the current portfolios. I will just show you: it has gone from the list.

Anthony CARBINES: I will certainly take your word for it. That is a bit harsh, isn’t it?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is a bit strange. I suppose my question initially is: why has crime prevention been demoted as a portfolio area on the justice website?

Anthony CARBINES: That is harsh. I might ask the Secretary if she wants to go and check the website. But what I would say, though, is – and it goes to a deeper issue on this – that I certainly have welcomed the Premier’s determination to move the crime prevention portfolio as a standalone portfolio but back with Victoria Police. People might have different views about that, but I do feel that there was an obligation to make sure that Victoria Police were not just working to make arrests at the pointy end of crime but were very heavily engaged in the crime prevention elements, coordinating and driving that work together – because there are plenty of programs across VicPol that also draw in crime prevention strategies and investment. So I have found that stakeholders and community organisations have found there has been value in having crime prevention and Victoria Police portfolios with the one minister. If that is missing, we can get that addressed –

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, we can.

Anthony CARBINES: because certainly I have been sworn in for that portfolio and we are doing that work. I would not be doing this half-hour if I was not.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, no; I understand that. Thank you, Minister. From the prior questioning that we heard, you have confirmed the shutdown of a specialist community crime prevention unit. Does that mean, for clarification, that there is no longer specialist criminology expertise in the department?

Anthony CARBINES: I will have to –

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: No, it has not been shut down; there have simply been structural changes within the team. There was a dedicated group, and they are now part of a larger group and spread out across several teams. So the capability is still there; the portfolio remains there. That was –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Still in the department?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Absolutely, the expertise is there. I have executives and staff that sit underneath me who have community crime prevention and crime prevention as their responsibilities, so it absolutely remains within the department.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you for clarifying. Youth Junction has been running a number of highly successful youth crime prevention programs in Sunshine working with 12 to 25-year-olds. Independent evaluation, which I think you referred to earlier, from Swinburne Uni showed a 29 per cent decrease in crime incidents after those interventions, but that program has got no new money. The grants are running out soon, so why haven’t you refunded the program?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Puglielli, your time is up. I am a ruthless timekeeper; I will admit that.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a break before beginning its consideration of the employment portfolio at 2:15 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.