

## Two men charged over alleged vigilante attack on Alice Springs children

*Family say bashing of two 13-year-olds was sparked by social media posts advocating extrajudicial justice, and left one boy unconscious*



*Todd Mall in Alice Springs, where the two 13-year-olds were allegedly bashed on 13 October. Photograph: Jonny Weeks for the Guardian*

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Two men have been charged over an alleged bashing of two 13-year-olds in Alice Springs, which family members said left one boy unconscious.

The two boys were walking with other children through the Todd Mall on Friday 13 October when “at least” four men pulled up in a white ute, the activist group Shut Youth Prisons said. The men allegedly chased the youths, catching the two boys.

“One was beaten unconscious, with injuries to his head,” the organisation said in a statement. “The other young boy tried to shield his cousin from the blows and was kicked and beaten as he lay on top of him. Both children were later taken to hospital.”

The boys’ grandfather, Bob Palmer, said he was concerned it was a vigilante attack, sparked by posts on community social media pages advocating extrajudicial justice against juveniles suspected of crime and antisocial behaviour.

“Who gives them the right to bash our kids?” he said. “We have to put a stop to this. We don’t want to wait until one of our kids dies.”

The Shut Youth Prisons group also published purported screenshots of posts to local community pages, including one from a woman who shared a police notice about a missing Indigenous boy and added the comment “kill em before they breed”.

Another poster appeared to support a vigilante group “flogging the fuck out of any cunts congregating around town”.

Northern Territory police confirmed that two men, aged 21 and 27, had been arrested and each charged with aggravated assault and engaging in violent conduct. One man was due to appear before court last week but failed to appear, and is now subject to an arrest warrant. The other is scheduled to appear next month.

“We fear for our lives and the police give us no answers,” Jakita Palmer, the mother of one of the boys, said. Palmer claimed the police did not visit the hospital to take statements and did not take any photographs of the injuries until two days after the incident.

NT police said they conducted a “thorough investigation” and could not comment further on the case as it was before the courts.

“Police do not support or condone any vigilante activity or anyone taking the law into their own hands,” a spokesman said. “We request that members of the public stop and think before potentially putting themselves and others at risk.”

In June a Western Australian man who admitted to running over and killing 14-year-old Elijah Doughty, who he suspected of stealing a motorbike, was sentenced to three years in jail. He was found not guilty of manslaughter but was convicted of causing death by dangerous driving.

There have been a number of attempts in recent years to form vigilante groups in Alice Springs, in response to juvenile crime. Under the previous Country Liberal party government youth services, including a late-night outreach service, were shut down, which youth workers said led to antisocial behaviour, drug use and unaccompanied children on the streets at night.

In 2015 a local man, Gary Hall, sought to form a “paramilitary” group to roam the streets at night and “bring into the line the antisocial behaviour and the criminality into what we would deem an acceptable level”.

The group’s actions were condemned by the Alice Springs mayor and then chief minister, Adam Giles.

Other community groups have set up outreach activities to actively engage with young people who are on the streets.