

'Nothing is off the table' in NT taskforce to tackle rising youth crime

Creation of the taskforce comes after incidents involving youths throwing rocks at police in Alice Springs



A police car in the Northern Territory. Taskforce Neo, to address youth crime, will 'focus on family dysfunction' and identify problem communities, areas and families, said the deputy police commissioner, Mark Payne.

Helen Davidson in Darwin

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“Nothing is off the table” in a government taskforce created to address growing concerns over youth crime in the Northern Territory, the deputy police commissioner, Mark Payne, has said.

But Payne would not be drawn on whether government cuts to youth services had contributed to the rise in youth crime.

The taskforce comes amid recent incidents involving dozens of youths throwing rocks at police amid widespread antisocial behaviour in Alice Springs.

Payne released details of the new taskforce, called Neo, on Friday morning, under which police and government departments will work towards varied response policies in Alice Springs and remote Northern Territory communities.

Youth offenders make up two-thirds of property crime offenders, Payne told media, and are overrepresented in other crime types, with the number of offenders doubling in the last 12 months.

Taskforce Neo will “focus on family dysfunction” and identify problem communities, areas and families, said Payne.

A joint management committee with representatives of government departments and the children’s commissioner will direct working groups led by “high-ranking” government officials. The groups will focus on areas including legislation, policy and engagement with youth and their families by government and community services.

Frontline services will be “part of the working groups”, Payne said, however they are not part of the management committee.

“I think a coordinated response to after-hours issues is important, but I think it’s unfortunate we seem to think in the territory that everything needs to be led by police,” John Adams, general manager of Jesuit Social Services told Guardian Australia.

“This should be led by local agencies who have been in this space for quite some time and have some of the solutions already prepared, and some of the experience in delivering those solutions.”

Community organisations, including the Jesuit Social Services, have repeatedly pointed to government funding cuts to youth services as contributing to growing issues in towns such as Alice Springs.

Shortly after coming to power, the Country Liberal government closed the Alice Springs Youth Hub, a key component of a previously bipartisan-supported youth action plan.

After-hours activities, which attorney general John Elferink has labelled “sundry services”, also lost funding, as did the youth support outreach

service. Social service workers have told Guardian Australia they warned the government at the time of the cuts that it would result in more kids out on the street and engaging in antisocial behaviour.

Neither Payne nor assistant commissioner Jamie Chalker would be drawn on what impact government cuts to youth services funding has had on youth crime and antisocial behaviour.

However Payne said “nothing was off the table” in the taskforce’s search for solutions. This included an idea raised by the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service for free wireless internet in town camps, derided by Elferink.

“[The taskforce] brings together a large number of different views, from government and non-government agencies to examine those things that have worked over time, some new ideas perhaps.”

Coordinating those activities and programs with key stakeholders “is a fundamental role of the taskforce,” he said.

“After-hours programs are a very important tool in ensuring that youth are occupied with more positive rather than negative activities,” said Payne.

Spikes in antisocial behaviour are often predictable, based on school holidays and local events – something Chalker also noted. He said despite rises in youth offenders, Alice Springs had last year reported its lowest level of property crime in six years. The taskforce would examine events which bring in large amounts of visitors to the town.

An increase of about 3,000 people to Alice Springs, including children from remote communities over the Easter period, when the Lightning football carnival was held, was attributed to a spike in unlawful entries.

“Activities such as these are fantastic events for Alice Springs and certainly improve economic service delivery, but what we also have to ensure is the safety of the town and we need to make sure we’re working together to reduce crime,” said Chalker.

Recent incidents of rock-throwing in Alice Springs resulted in dozens of young people being taken into protective custody and sparked warnings

from the government of “zero tolerance” and threats to put the young offenders in state care unless parents do something to curb their behaviour.

The North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (Naaja) rubbished the suggestion, pointing out that most of the youths taken into custody were already in state care, the NT News reported.

Payne said police make case-by-case assessments when dealing with children and young people who may need to be in state care.

Lauren Moss, opposition spokeswoman for child protection, accused the government of grandstanding.

“A fear campaign threatening removal of children does not get to the heart of these issues,” Moss said in statement.

“Alice Springs social workers have been calling on the government to support and maintain youth outreach services that help identify children at risk. Instead of a measured and well-informed plan all we have seen from the government is a kneejerk reaction to a known problem, threatening to take children into state care.”