

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 7 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Mr Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Crime Prevention,

Ms Kate Houghton, Secretary, and

Mr 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 please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 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, comments repeated outside 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 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 and officers from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Minister, I am going to invite you to make a short statement and presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks very much, Chair and committee members. The 2023–24 budget invests a further \$13.64 million over three years to prevent youth offending through early intervention. Investment means we can continue to prevent crime by delivering our *Crime Prevention Strategy*, tackling the cause of youth offending and partnering with communities and key organisations to create safer, more connected communities. We are continuing to invest in our *Crime Prevention Strategy*, which demonstrates a commitment to addressing youth offending in communities where it is needed most. Since 2015 the government has invested more than \$100 million into 948 crime prevention initiatives across the state, and 98 of those initiatives are underway now across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

Since 2016–17, including investments in the 2023–24 budget, we have invested more than \$40 million in the youth crime prevention program. That program is delivered in locations throughout the state with higher rates of youth offending, with an evaluation showing a 29 per cent reduction in offending and a 24 per cent reduction in severity of offending for participants. Since the program began more than 1800 young people have been provided with intensive support and an additional 3000 young people have been engaged in prosocial activities to build protective factors against offending. The program is successful because it provides flexible and tailored support to respond to young people's individual needs and their changing circumstances. It takes a place-based, community-led approach to addressing local drivers of offending and service gaps, and it is built on a partnership model between community service organisations and government.

An example of that is the OutTeach program delivered by 54 Reasons in Shepparton. It is a unique model whereby a youth worker and teacher work to connect young people to a range of supports to establish and sustain education and employment pathways. OutTeach has changed the lives of more than 60 young people.

I have recently had the opportunity to visit some of our youth crime prevention program sites and have seen firsthand the great work they do, including the Pivot program delivered by YSAS in Casey and Dandenong and Berry Street's multi-agency support team – MAST – project in Ballarat.

Tackling the causes of crime requires a coordinated approach, and the best outcomes are achieved when government partners with and invests in those local communities to achieve a common goal. Nine Empowering Community partnerships have been established across the state, with a total investment of \$6.45 million from 2021 in the 2021–22 state budgets. Because every community is different, each Empowering Community partnership is different and focuses on the issues and concerns that are most relevant to local communities. For example, in the Brimbank local government area the goal is to maximise the life potential of young people and reduce pathways into the youth justice system by connecting them to culture, community, education, family and employment. So far the nine local action groups established in Empowering Community sites have utilised that funding to support 44 local initiatives that have received a total of \$3.12 million, with action groups to identify further initiatives over the coming financial year.

A total of \$4.78 million has been invested in Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch until 30 June 2025. These trusted partners work with government and Victoria Police to tackle crime and increase community safety and confidence. For example, between February 2022 and February 2023 Crime Stoppers supported over 950 arrests and \$35 million in drugs recovery. Neighbourhood Watch is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. The organisation has come a long way since it was formed in Frankston back in 1983. Volunteers remain at its heart, and today Neighbourhood Watch has more than 4000 active members across 190 local groups.

The government remains committed to building a safer community for all Victorians. That is why we invest in and work with communities to prevent crime and support young people in particular to avoid contact with the justice system. Since 2016–17, 4800 young people have received either intensive support or engagement with prosocial activities to build protective factors against offending through the youth crime prevention program. Our crime prevention program engages thousands of young people in the community more broadly, and in the past year we have engaged more than 1200 community members in crime prevention activities, forums and events to build knowledge and understanding and to help foster local partnerships.

Crime Stoppers has received over 100,000 contacts from the public, supporting 950 arrests. Neighbourhood Watch has 4000 active members, as I touched on, engaging with thousands in multicultural communities and people living in new housing estates.

We are proud of the three scholarships from VU – Victoria University – for their graduate certificate in crime prevention. It is also doing amazing work to prevent crime and create a safe state for everybody.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, I am going to throw to you for the next 8 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, budget paper 3, page 263, shows a \$4.3 million cut in the 'Community Crime Prevention' budget compared to last year. Indeed the revised figure indicates there was an underspend as well. Specifically what programs have been cut or will no longer run because of this cut?

Anthony CARBINES: Just on that page 263, the 'Community Crime Prevention' output includes initiatives related to countering violent extremism as well as crime prevention. It includes investments in time-limited infrastructure and projects that will not receive further funding once they are completed.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, Minister, I did not hear what you said first. It includes what?

Anthony CARBINES: The 'Community Crime Prevention' output on page 263 includes initiatives related to countering violent extremism –

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. Thank you. That was said so quickly I had no idea what you said.

Anthony CARBINES: sorry –

The CHAIR: Take cover, Deputy Chair.

Anthony CARBINES: as well as crime prevention. It includes investments in some time-limited infrastructure – that means the projects that will not receive further funding once they are completed. Some of

that countering violent extremism investment is for capital works – bollards in the CBD and the like – and so that means when those matters are concluded we do not continue to roll on the expenditure. But the output has already invested some \$19.4 million for fixed-term grants through the Building Safer Communities program, and that has provided up to three years of funding to councils and community organisations to test and pilot innovative ideas to tackle the causes of crime. Those projects are delivered over multiple years, so the funding is phased accordingly. The projects generally require most of those funds, as you can see, up-front to get those projects fired up and going and then they taper off towards the end and there are probably smaller budget outlays as we roll through. We have boosted our investment in youth crime prevention, following that report in 2022 on youth crime prevention programs, which shows a 29 per cent reduction in offending for participants, and we have invested a further \$18 million. In this budget there is \$13.64 million – BP3, pages 82 and 84 – to continue that program to 26 June.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is out of that \$23.9 million on page 263?

Anthony CARBINES: On page 263 – yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: It is. Okay. Thank you.

Anthony CARBINES: What we are doing there is that that money continues. So those lapsing programs are continuing through that \$13.64 million, but the programs that had a capital component – most of them countering violent extremism – are concluded, because the stuff is built.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask a question to the Secretary. For each crime prevention project that is run, how do you actually judge if they have worked? I note the performance measures on page 269 are pretty broad. How do you actually know if programs have reduced crime?

Kate HOUGHTON: Each of the programs will have an evaluation. I think in 2022 the program at that time was evaluated, and that reported that young people that had completed a planned exit were much less likely to offend. So that is one of the measures, and each project is also evaluated.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Minister, on that, I will go to page 269 and the performance measures. Clearly crime prevention, by definition, is designed to try and reduce or prevent crime. I will read out a couple of the performance measures.

Anthony CARBINES: 269, sorry?

Danny O'BRIEN: 269, yes:

Number of community members engaged in capability building activities, to increase effective delivery of crime prevention initiatives ...

...

Proportion of crime prevention projects that use a partnership approach supported to improve the effectiveness and quality of collaboration ...

Outcomes of Crime Prevention funded projects published within 12 months of project completion ...

How do any of those actually tell us whether we are preventing crime with these projects?

Anthony CARBINES: Sure. Well, part of what we are doing now – on 269 – includes those discontinuing measures, which is the proportion of crime prevention grant applications prepared using crime prevention resources. So that was going back in my preso, where I talked about the \$100 million we have spent on 948 different crime prevention projects. Earlier we threw a lot of money out there to see what works. Now we are focused on a new performance measure – on that page 269, which is in BP 3 of course. The new performance measure instead is capturing the outcomes more accurately for the youth crime prevention program, so the number of young people completing a planned exit through the youth crime prevention project. It is over 4800 young people, because we know from what the Secretary touched on, the evaluation in 2022, that young people completing a planned exit are less likely to reoffend or to offend. So what we want to do is move from \$100 million over the time we have been in office and 948 programs to focusing down on what we measure in our outputs in BP 3 – on who are the kids and who it is working for. We need to focus on that now.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is the point of the question. I do not want to read those jargon words out again.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, it is not as clear there.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you satisfied that these performance measures are actually telling us whether we are doing a good job of preventing crime?

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, and I think that is why there is an acknowledgement there that what we need to move beyond is the broad spend – 'give community the opportunity to see what works' – and now focus on a new performance measure which is holding us to greater account more accurately for a youth crime prevention program, around the number of young people completing a planned exit.

Danny O'BRIEN: Ironically that is the only one I did not read out, Minister. It is the other three that I have read out to you that I have got an issue with. I mean, the one I read out – 'Proportion of crime prevention projects that use a partnership approach supported to improve the effectiveness and quality of collaboration' – and the footnote says it 'has been amended for increased clarity'; that does not tell us anything.

Anthony CARBINES: I just think it is that broader fact of our broad investment, where we are now focusing down to what projects that we fund over a period of time now are working most effectively. Let us measure that. That is what BP 3 goes to in a new performance measure.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. So, Minister, just to clarify, you think that the performance measures we have got on the crime prevention portfolio are actually doing a good job in telling the community whether we are successfully preventing crime?

Anthony CARBINES: They need to do two things. One is moving beyond where we are doing the investment, how many programs and the like and their acquittal, to now understanding how many young kids are getting the support they need.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is young kids. That is one of them.

Anthony CARBINES: And we can do that once you get the investment rolling. We are now starting to get those results for young people, and we want to demonstrate that by having that in the budget papers as a new performance measure that we are held accountable to.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. All right. As I mentioned, Minister, on 263 there is a \$1.1 million underspend from the budget last year to the revised figure. Why did that occur? Were there things that just did not get done, that came to a close early? Why was that money not spent?

Anthony CARBINES: Whereabouts are you there, Mr O'Brien, sorry – 263?

Danny O'BRIEN: 263, 'Community Crime Prevention'. So the budget was \$28.2 million and the revised is only \$27.1 million.

Anthony CARBINES: Again, this is an accounting in relation to those capital works projects under countering violent extremism where the projects have been concluded.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, but you would have known that they were going to come to an end.

Anthony CARBINES: No, not always the timing of when they would come to an end. They have concluded in reasonable time and so that is then reflected in the figures here, but I can assure you through the \$13.6 million in this year's budget that the programs out of that crime prevention that have lapsed are continuing and are funded in the budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We will go to Mr Hilakari for the next 11 minutes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials. I am actually going to follow on somewhat from Mr O'Brien and take you to page 82 in budget paper 3, which goes to the preventing youth offending through early intervention program, which is set out over three years. I am just hoping you can go through what are the projects that are funded and some of the purpose in a bit more detail.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The youth crime prevention program provides funding for what are community-led initiatives that support young people to address the causes of offending in their own lives. It is really important with those projects – some of our most important in the crime prevention portfolio – as they work with some of our most at-risk young people. The projects work with young people aged 10 to 24, and to date more than 1800 young people have received intensive one-on-one support through the program. We know that for most of the young people who commit these crimes it is lower level; it is something they age out of, in many ways. However, there is also a very small number of young people that commit a disproportionate amount of the offences. The youth crime prevention program projects provide this intensive support for really narrowing in on those young people who can build a fulfilling life for themselves and reduce the harm they cause by crime, but we are really going to target their supports. The program currently operates in 15 locations, given that the intensive support that we have demonstrated – and the risk of contact or further contact with the justice system is what we are trying to avoid. We partner with community organisations, which are able to tailor projects to suit local conditions with the aim of preventing crime by addressing its root causes in the lives of some of our most vulnerable young people. As a result, they target different young people and have different approaches really tailored for the local communities in which people live. It is an approach that we have incorporated since day one with these projects. The government has worked with project areas over some six months to support a community-based project design for the grants, and the projects were reflective of the actual needs in those local areas.

As an example, in Ballarat in particular I recently visited Berry Street and the work they are doing in their multi-agency support team, or MAST, initiative. It is a project that provides wraparound support by bringing together and coordinating a broad group of existing local services, ensuring that a referred person receives the service they need to get back on track. What we have seen with MAST demonstrates that there is a clear strength in the program. Its distinguishing feature is its ability to support delivery of a wide range of services and approaches. The program's locations – we are delivering services, from a range of long-term, intensive, family-centred case management support and coaching and mentoring to pro-social activities which engage young people and help them form positive connections to peers and others. At a regional level the program is supported by seven regional crime prevention officers within the Department of Justice and Community Safety. They help manage and coordinate the program, and those officers provide support to the program and have made an important contribution to what has been very, very successful.

The next part of our work is: how do we broaden out? While they are very much structured around what works in a local community, there are clearly elements that we can apply in other local circumstances, without diminishing the capacity to be flexible to respond – all communities are different. It is an opportunity to transition the MAST project across the state, and I am keen to do that in the future. Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: As you have mentioned, we can take our learnings and roll them out across the state, but I guess I would like to know how we know these programs are effective, so could you go through some of the projects that have been successful?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. I am keen to demonstrate some of those tangible impacts of those programs. We published an evaluation report on the first four years of the program in March last year. This found some really positive outcomes – across the entire program there was a marked reduction in offending, a drop of 29 per cent, which I think is really remarkable. When you consider the program works with the most disadvantaged young people in the state, a reduction of this size demonstrates the achievement of the program. Along with that we saw impressive drops in the severity of offending when it did occur, a 24 per cent reduction in serious offending. More remarkably again, of the at-risk cohort that is being referred to in the program, only 13 per cent offended post program. So it is important to note that the program is about a lot more than just reducing offending; it is guiding young people away from committing offences and giving them the tools and resources to engage with employment, education, family and community in healthy and productive ways.

Something that might interest the Chair is that in her own electorate, or in the broader area around Brimbank, we saw the highest levels of employment gain post program of anywhere across the state. In Latrobe we saw a significant improvement in engagement in schools, and Frankston had the highest increase in community connectedness. Across the board we saw impressive improvement in participant engagement: a more than 27 per cent improvement in engagement in education, 36 per cent in engaging in training, and more than 17 per cent of participants gained employment. From a cohort of young and vulnerable these are critical figures, and

they go to show that not only are we preventing crime but we are really making a difference in the lives of these young people. An overwhelming 95 per cent of participants had decreases in the risk factors they were facing from substance abuse, psychological distress or something similar.

With these programs we have also seen positive changes in the drivers that can push someone towards offending in their lives. More importantly, they have made real change to the lives of really very disadvantaged young people who have just not really had an even break in their lives. This is about getting in and providing the support that they have lacked and not had previously. We have seen positive change. We know that what is clear is that the longer young people stay in the program, the better the results are. Prolonged support of longer than six months is producing better results for a longer time in preventing offending and increasing engagement, so sometimes we just need to be prepared to take longer in our efforts to turn around lives that otherwise are going to be washed through the justice system for a long time.

I would like to note the program's strong alignment with some of our broader reforms, the Victorian youth strategy and the youth justice strategy. Both place a strong emphasis on the early intervention, the wraparound supports and the evidence-informed models of care that this program brings to so many locations that it serves. We are committed to intervening early to prevent involvement with the criminal justice system. We know that that is good not only for those young people but for all of us who want to see investment at the early end, early intervention, not when it is all too late for people. If we can continue to do that over the next three years, what a great opportunity to see more strong results and changed lives for young people through the youth crime prevention program.

Mathew HILAKARI: Minister, could you maybe outline some of the individuals that have been helped by this program? Maybe some case studies would be helpful.

Anthony CARBINES: Sure, Mr Hilakari. The evaluation included a few case studies that really demonstrate how the program has helped vulnerable young people turn lives around and get back on track. One case study that stood out to me was the case of Mia, who was referred to the program at only 11 years of age. She had a history of childhood trauma and family instability. It led to her living with her maternal stepgrandmother. Through the program she was referred to services like Headspace, which allowed her to work through her trauma history. She and her parents attended sessions with a family therapist on a fortnightly basis, and because these services are tied together via the program, we were able to offer wholistic and tailored support consistently to support her and her family. At the end of the eight months Mia spent in the program she was able to move back to her family home. Family disagreements had decreased. She remained not only engaged in education but she was able to take on a student leadership role and had no further involvement with police. Her mental health and wellbeing improved. Those protective factors I spoke about – engagement in education, community and family – had all been reaffirmed and reinforced for her.

I had the pleasure of launching the completed Reignite Geelong client voice project back in April, a fantastic initiative which is being funded as an add-on to the Reignite Geelong youth crime prevention program funded last year. It is auspiced by Meli, which was formed recently out of the merger of Barwon Child, Youth and Family and the Bethany Community Support Group. It was developed to help to centre the voices of the vulnerable young people we are trying to support through services like the youth crime prevention program. This is providing an invaluable opportunity for us to hear from our most vulnerable about how they want to be supported and how we can work with them to improve their lives. The project gave some 12 young people who had had contact with and been affected by the justice system the opportunity to share their stories. The results have been published online in a report on an interactive website which helps to ensure that this information is an accessible resource. We know that young people involved in or at risk of being involved in the justice system have complex histories, and this project gave them an opportunity to tell their story in their own words.

I would invite members of the committee who are interested in more stories of how the youth crime prevention program can help vulnerable people and at-risk young people to take a look at the client voice project and see it for themselves and really the affirmations from those young people. It also I found gives great heart to so many of our social services workforce, the people who live in these communities with vulnerable people, who want to improve their communities. In Geelong the affirmation and I suppose the 'get up and go to work and do some of the toughest jobs' – to meet those people and to hear those stories and to see I think the joy and the gratitude that they felt, the relief they felt that the work they do does bring about change for people. The commitment of their working lives to support vulnerable people is to be commended.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Sandell, the next 3 minutes belong to you.

Ellen SANDELL: Thanks very much. I will just refer you to budget paper 4, page 79, around prison expansion – and then page 82 around crime prevention. Once completed, the increases to men's prison capacity are expected to cost more than \$750 million, yet we are only committing \$23 million to community crime prevention over the forward estimates. So it is only 3 per cent of what we are spending on new prison capacity. Isn't that a mismatching of priorities?

Anthony CARBINES: I suppose what I would say in relation to some of the recurrent funding and the like that relates to corrections is that it is really a matter that Minister Erdogan could speak to, and I understand he is appearing next week at the hearings. My task is really to oversee the work that we are doing to make sure we keep as many people as possible out of our corrections system, and –

Ellen SANDELL: How can we do that if we are only spending 3 per cent on crime prevention compared to what we are spending on prisons?

Anthony CARBINES: I think it just depends on what comparisons you want to make. There is still always going to be an element of people who are at the wrong end of the system, and the work that we are charged with doing here is to make sure that there is ongoing investment, not only in the \$100 million since we have been in office for these community crime prevention projects, 948 of them, but now to target back down. Everyone has had a crack at things that work to varying degrees, but then how do we now focus our efforts on expanding programs that have been particularly successful? That is what the \$13.64 million in this year's budget is focused on doing. We are getting results and it is working, but I would agree we can always do more.

Ellen SANDELL: I will take you to budget paper 3, page 82, now around early intervention to counter violent extremism. Can we just confirm you were talking about concrete bollards in the CBD? We have got \$1.8 million and then \$1.7 million in 2024–25 and then nothing beyond that. Is that primarily for bollards, or is any of that actually around the countering violent extremism programs?

Anthony CARBINES: It is, yes, and I suppose part of what I would say is there has been a capital component, but the \$3.52 million in the budget over the next two years –

Ellen SANDELL: Sorry, is some of that capital? Is some of that \$3.5 million capital or not?

Anthony CARBINES: Ongoing now? No. We have done an element of the capital work. What we really want to use that money for is organisations, like continuing work with the Northern Community Support Group, which you would be familiar with, and also organisations like the Australian Multicultural Foundation and others, to auspice them. That is where –

Ellen SANDELL: So none of this is capital works, this \$1.8 million and \$1.7 million.

Anthony CARBINES: I can check, but I thought that we had largely concluded the capital works and keeping the programs going is really our goal here.

Ellen SANDELL: So then why is there nothing committed beyond 2024–25 for those programs, and do any of those programs actually include the far right and neo-Nazis – countering that kind of extremism?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Sandell. Your time is up. Minister and department 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 is now going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of racing at 2:20 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.