

Anglicare Southern Queensland

Media Guidelines for Reporting on Youth Offending

- 1. Persistent negative stories about young people stereotype everyone's children and shape a public discourse that diminishes all young people. Positive stories are needed to provide essential balance.**
- 2. Journalists aim to be objective in their reporting. This is especially important when reporting about alleged youth offences. Negative and sensational language (including headlines) relating to alleged youth offending damages the young people involved, their families, and our communities.**
- 3. Stories and images that are sourced from social media must be checked for accuracy.**
- 4. Updated stories should be clearly identified, as such. Stories that are constantly repeated with minor changes imply that young people are committing more crime than they are.**
- 5. Statistics are powerful. Ethical use of statistics tells the complete story and does not seek to manipulate or mislead.**
- 6. Children and young people should not be identifiable in the text or images when reporting alleged offending. This includes their names, faces, families, clothes or other recognisable features.**
- 7. Publications and media organisations should be held accountable when they consistently breach these guidelines.**

These guidelines emerged from discussions with young people in Anglicare Southern Queensland's Intensive Bail Initiative program (IBI). The IBI works collaboratively across sectors to support 10–17-year-olds who are among the small proportion of young people in Queensland at significant risk of serious and long-term offending.

The conversations took place against a particularly damaging and contentious public narrative about alleged youth offending, fueled, in part, by pockets of negativity and sensationalism in media reporting.

The media plays a significant role in influencing how safe people feel, and how they respond to others in their communities. The constant flow of negative commentary, directed at young people, impacts how community members think about youth, their views of alleged youth offending, and their willingness to support and engage with young people who have a life history of doing it tough.

There is extensive evidence that shows that positive community ties and support are key protective factors for young people at risk of involvement in the justice system. The negative commentary described above however positions young people as outsiders in their own communities.

The experience of being an outsider, particularly for a teenager, is deeply harmful, and research shows that young people often respond with substance use/abuse, risky behaviors, mental health concerns, such as depression; and disengagement from school. They search out a peer group where they can feel they belong.

Sometimes 'Facebook vigilantism' names and shames such groups of young people regardless of whether they're to blame for alleged crimes or not. Photos of young people are uploaded to community Facebook pages for looking suspicious: wearing a hoodie or black backpack, riding a skateboard or gathering in a park. Because few young people engage with Facebook anymore, the groups become echo chambers of toxic comments about voiceless young people who are not present to set the record straight.

When such photos and stories are picked up by mainstream media, a destructive cycle of telling and retelling sets in, increasing the alienation of young people from the neighbourhoods in which they live, and the community's fear of them. No one wins.

Negative perceptions of young people and their offending are not solely driven by the media. There is a great deal of evidence, however, that the media has an influential role to play in shaping public opinion.

These guidelines, informed by the young people, who are most affected, will go a long way toward restoring balance and fairness in reporting about young people and their alleged offending.