Media guidelines

Reporting on children and young people's offending

Anglicare
Southern Queensland

Media play an important role in influencing how safe people feel and how they respond to others in their communities.

This particularly impacts young people because, for decades, the media has described 'youth crime waves' as a major social problem, often using negative and sensational language to spotlight high profile but rare events.

When this narrative becomes pervasive in our community, as it has in recent years, it creates fear, damages relationships, isolates our children, and influences government policy in ways that create harm to young people.

National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) has created a great resource for journalists, editors, writers and content creators who want to help create better lives for all children.

The media guidelines in this document complement this work, focusing specifically on reporting about children and young people's offending. The guidelines have been informed by conversations with young people at risk of, or who have had, involvement in the youth justice system.

Their comments demonstrate why it is so important for media professionals and others to carefully consider the impact of their reporting - not only on children and young people, but on the rest of the community as well.

Guideline 1

Reporting on young people should include positive stories, to provide balance.

Positive community ties and support are key protective factors for young people at risk of involvement in the justice system.

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.

Research and experience consistently shows that connection, inclusion, and support are protective factors that help young people avoid or exit out of the justice system. When negative stories are all communities hear, it perpetuates fear and those pathways to safety close off.

Best practice media guidelines, such as those outlined by the Australian Press Council, MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics, and UNICEF's reporting standards on children, stress the importance of accuracy, fairness, and avoiding harm. That includes ensuring stories do not promote stigma or reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Positive stories aren't spin - they're essential balance. They reflect the full truth of who young people are - resilient, diverse, and often navigating complex challenges. Including these stories helps:

- Shift public attitudes
- Build community connection
- Encourage solutions-based thinking
- Uphold the rights and dignity of children

Fair reporting means telling the whole story - not just the most sensational part.

Q If you were in charge of a media outlet (TV, online news sites etc) what rules would you put in place for the way young people involved in alleged offending behaviour are described?

A “Make sure that they don’t keep saying “this happened again”. Focus on fixing not blaming.

Jacob, aged 19 years

Stop all the hating and try and spread positivity.

Tahlia, aged 18 years

Guideline 2

Accuracy, context, and respect for human rights should guide all reporting.

Media play a significant role in influencing how safe people feel, and how they respond to others in their communities.

Most media professionals recognise their responsibility to report accurately and ethically, especially when it involves children and young people. Sensational headlines and dehumanising language related to alleged youth offending can cause serious long-term harm to the young people involved, their families, and our communities.

Ethical journalism isn't about ignoring crime – it's about how we report on it.

DO

- Use neutral, factual language
- Focus on the issue, not the individual
- Consider the broader context behind alleged offences
- Protect the identity of young people, unless legally permitted
- Highlight positive community responses or solutions
- Remember your influence on public perception and safety

DON'T

- Use sensational or fear-driven headlines
- Label or stigmatise young people (eg. 'thug', 'gang').
- Assume guilt before court outcomes
- Isolate incidents from broader systemic issues
- Share details that local communities can use for identification
- Feed harmful narratives that divide communities

Guideline 3

Stories and images that are sourced from social media need to be checked for accuracy.

Because social media content spreads quickly and often lacks context, it's easy for misleading or false information to go viral. When media professionals use social media content without verifying it, they risk spreading misinformation.

The rise of 'social media vigilantism', where users comment on or post photos of young people and accuse them of wrongdoing without grounds, intensifies the risk of misinformation and moral panic.

Because most young people aren't active on platforms such as Facebook, they are denied the chance to defend themselves leaving them vulnerable to judgement and suspicion from the public, without cause.

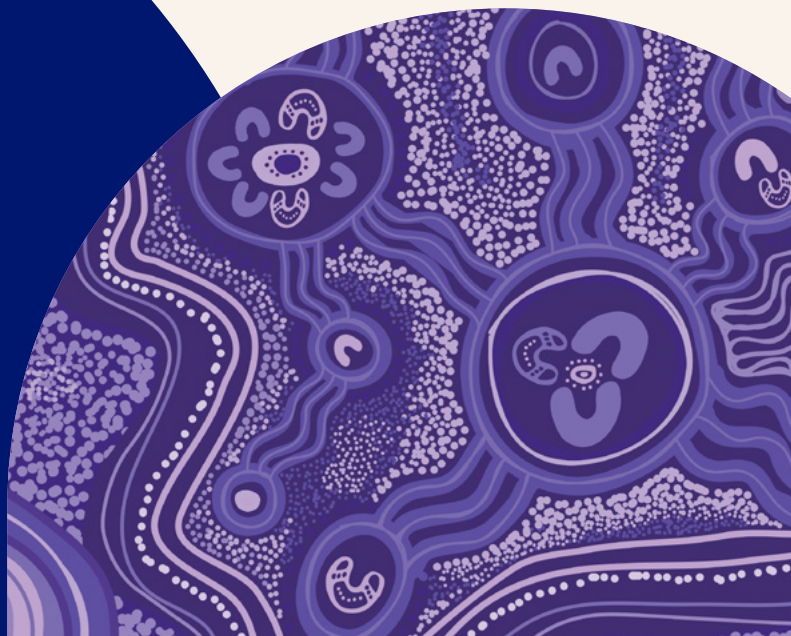
These 'echo chambers' often:

- Target young people unfairly based on how they look, dress, or gather in public
- Rely on hearsay rather than verified facts
- Amplify fear and anger, instead of informed discussion

Media professionals need to:

- Treat social media content as a **starting point**, not a source of truth
- **Verify** before reporting or resharing
- **Avoid** amplifying harmful content that lacks context or consent
- Be mindful of the **power imbalance** when reporting on children and young people

Being first is not more important than being right - especially when real lives and reputations are at stake.



Guideline 4

Updated stories should be clearly identified as such.

Journalistic and editorial integrity includes ensuring that audiences aren't misled by republished material.

When updates to a story - such as new court dates or quotes - are republished with new headlines, particularly without clear labelling that indicates the story refers to an ongoing case, readers may interpret each version as a separate incident. This repetition can create the false impression that youth crime is more frequent or severe than it actually is.

Media professionals have a responsibility to ensure that updates are clearly marked, and that reporting practices do not unintentionally exaggerate the prevalence of youth offending.

This can be done by:

- **Using clear labels** such as 'Update', 'Follow-up', or 'New Developments' in headlines and subheadings
- **Including timestamps** and editorial notes that explain what has changed since the original publication
- **Avoiding republishing** updates as standalone stories unless the new information significantly alters the narrative

> How the media makes out the young people committing so much more crime than they are.

Hannah, aged 19 years

Guideline 5

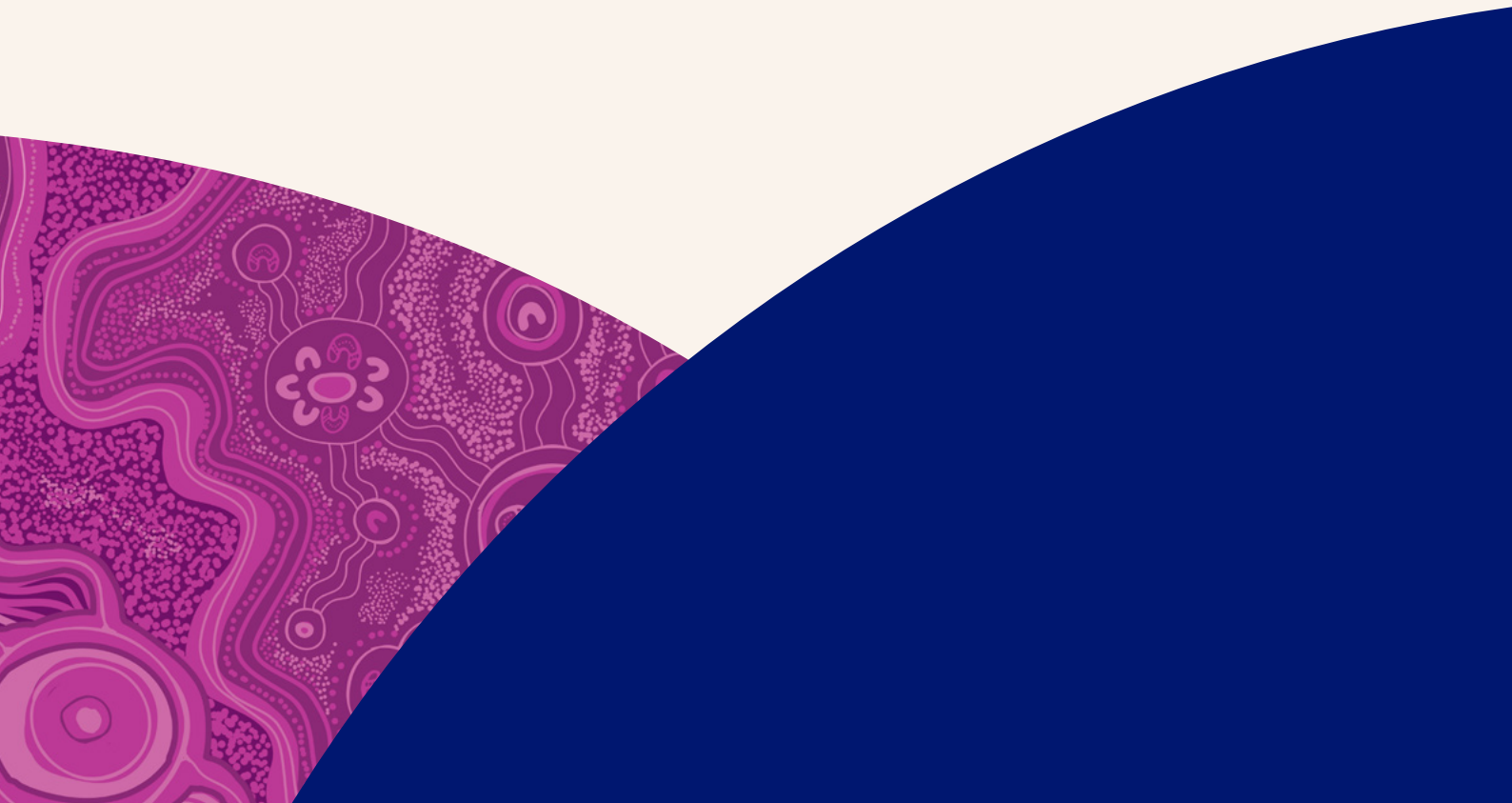
Statistics should be used in context, not used to manipulate information or mislead audiences.

Media reporting of 'shock data' about an apparent surge of youth crime in Queensland and other states, and the subsequent political and community commentary, tells only part of the story. It is, in itself, likely to be a contributor to community concern and fear.

Increases and decreases in youth offending should be seen as relative to similar trends in adult offending figures. Both should be contextualised against figures from a decade ago, when Australian crime statistics were 20 – 25% higher than they are now. Local and regional statistics should not be presented as divorced from population growth and other trends.

Telling the wrong, or an incomplete, story harms both the people who are being misrepresented; and the community that is being manipulated.

A statistic is not only a number - there is a human story behind each and every figure.



2023–2024

Youth offending	=	the lowest rate in a decade relative to population
Trespassing and vagrancy	=	over 50% of offences among children aged 10–14 years
The most violent Queenslanders	=	offenders aged 30–39 years
The largest number increase from 2022–23	=	offenders aged 40–44 years
The largest % increase from 2022–23	=	offenders aged 50–54 years

Queensland Government Statistician's Office, 2024. Crime Report, Queensland, 2022–23.

Guideline 6

Children and young people should not be identifiable in the text or images when reporting alleged offending.

In a digital world, images and commentary posted online become permanent records of a moment in time. Images can resurface years later - digitally altered, taken out of context, or simply the traces of mistakes made and learned from.

Identifying children and young people in media stories about offending behaviour (proven or alleged) has the potential to do harm over many years. Stigma can impact young people's access to education, work, housing and safety, and it undermines their chances of feeling like they belong to their community.

Photos, community comments and reactions posted on social media platforms can deliberately or unwittingly identify children in their local neighbourhood, and expose them to shaming, threats and unfounded accusations. They become outsiders in their own communities.

Community ties and support are a key protective factor for young people, so that experience of being an outsider is deeply harmful.

Negative perceptions of young people and their offending aren't solely driven by the media, but there is a great deal of evidence that the media has an influential role to play in shaping public opinion.

> **The way they talk about us young people makes us seems like bad people. We're not bad people.**
>
> **Caitlin, aged 18 years**

Guideline 7

Publications and media organisations should be held accountable when they consistently breach these guidelines.

Australians spend on average up to 14 hours/week on social media, depending on their age group; while public consumption of online news has trended upwards year on year.

These figures signal the influential role that media plays in shaping public opinion. As the Advertising Council Australia points out, "Social media, web and online communities … are dynamic, fluid and increasingly powerful in their ability to capture community sentiment and shape the conversations we have with each other".

With great power comes great responsibility is a quote ascribed to figures as various as Voltaire, Winston Churchill and Spider-Man, but it's no less accurate for that diversity of sources.

Media professionals, publications and news outlets should be held accountable if they deliberately and consistently use sensational headlines and content when writing about children and young people who offend, or who are just suspected of offending behaviours.

Wearing a hoodie, riding a skateboard or gathering with friends in a park aren't crimes, and shouldn't be reported in ways that imply they are.

Final word

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.

No one wins when harmful reporting practices, or viral social media accusations, go unchecked.

Contact

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