

# Youth Justice: A balanced approach

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## A little about me

- Worked in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice for over 20 years
- Research interests include child protection, youth justice, family violence, life course criminology, research-policy nexus
- Prior to doing my PhD worked in government departments in NZ and Australia
- Member of the Australian Psychological Society College of Forensic Psychologists
- Member of Child Death Case Review Committee (CDCRC)
- Stewart, A., Allard, T., and Dennison, S. (2011). *Evidence based policy and practice in youth justice*. Federation Press

## What we know about youth crime

1. Youth offending is normal and not on the increase
2. For most young people diversion or minimum intervention is the best response
3. A small number of young people are responsible for the majority of youth crime
4. For these young people universal services and holistic approaches are the most effective response rather than criminal justice responses
5. Custodial sentences are the least effective and most damaging interventions

## Youth offending is normal and not on the increase

- Most young people offend (self report studies)
  - » Drinking underage
  - » Smoking marijuana
  - » Shoplifting
  - » Property crime
  - » Driving unlicensed
  - » Fare dodging
  - » Fighting
  - » Motor vehicle theft
  - » Cyberstalking
  
- Poor decision making
- Risk taking and sensation seeking
- Mature; find a job, get married, get a mortgage, have children
  
- Majority of young people do not come into contact with the youth justice system

## Youth offending is normal and not on the increase

- Our data indicate that in Queensland
- By age 17 years
  - » 1 in 5 boys have had contact with the youth justice system
  - » 1 in 10 girls have had contact with the youth justice system
  - » Mainly property related offences
- By age 25
  - » 1 in 2 young men have had contact with the criminal justice system
  - » 1 in 7 young women have had contact with the criminal justice system
  - » Mainly drug and alcohol related, public order and low level aggression offences
- Queensland Police Service data indicates that in the past five years youth crime rates stable or declining

## For most young people diversion or minimum intervention is the best response

- Police cautioning available for
  - » First time offenders
  - » Minor offences
  - » Guilty plea and consent to process
  
- Almost 90% of young offenders receive at least one police caution
  
- Do cautioned young people reappear in the criminal justice system (age 25)?
  - » 35% never reappear
  - » 30% reappear once or twice
  
- Police cautions are cost effective (police caution \$1,275, Youth Court appearance \$3,701)
  
- Police cautions are not available for (17 – 25 year olds)

## A small number of young people are responsible for the majority of youth crime

- 5% of young offenders are responsible (852)
  - » for almost 40% of appearances in the youth justice system
  - » By 25
    - average of 23 finalised court appearances
    - average of 70 offences
    - almost 50% sentenced to adult prison
  
- These young offenders (chronic offenders)
  - » start offending young
  - » offend frequently
  - » offend seriously

## A small number of young people are responsible for the majority of youth crime

What do we know about these chronic young offenders?

- Born to teenage/single parents
- Premature, low birth weight
- Fetal alcohol syndrome/spectrum
- Family drug and alcohol abuse
- Family violence
- Family mental health issues
- Family economically stressed
- Remote and rural
- Parental incarceration
- Are maltreated
  - » physically, sexually, emotionally and neglected
- Learning difficulties
- Have difficulties in school, behavior problems, truancy, exclusion
- Homeless/couch surfing
- Low levels of education, unemployed, unemployable
- High levels of suicide/mental health issues/ teenage pregnancy



## For these young people universal services and holistic approaches are the most effective response rather than criminal justice responses

- Intergenerational disadvantage
- Crime prone communities
- Interventions need to occur not just with the individual but the family and wider community
- Whole of system response (not just the criminal justice system)
  - » Health
  - » Child protection
  - » Education
  - » Housing
  - » Welfare
- Evidence based interventions (limited Australia evidence);
  - » What works in preventing the initiation of offending?
  - » What works in preventing reoffending?

## What works with this group of chronic offenders?

- **Prevent initiation of offending**
  - » Universal services targeted at crime-prone communities
    - Home visitation of families with infants
    - Preschool education programs involve parents
    - Parent training for managing troublesome children
    - Programs for preventing family violence
    - School based programs
  
- **Prevent reoffending**
  - » Holistic, ecological programs
    - Multisystemic Therapy
    - Functional Family Therapy
    - Aggression Replacement Training
    - Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care
  - » Expensive, 24 hour 7 day interventions but have been shown to be cost effective

## Custodial sentences are the least effective and most damaging interventions

- Of the 241 children sentenced to detention in our data
  - » 85% reoffended as adults (before 25)
  - » 60% were incarcerated as adults
  
- Only two youth detention centres in Queensland
  - » Brisbane
  - » Cleveland
  - » Child often moved away from their family
  
- Detention \$693 per day (\$250,000 per year)
- Prison \$289 per day (\$100,000 per year)

## Implications

1. Youth offending is normal and not on the increase
2. Diversion or minimum intervention is the best response
  - » Extend police cautioning to include young adults
  - » Cost effective response to offending
3. A small number of young people are responsible for the majority of youth crime
  - » Need to address intergenerational disadvantage
  - » Need to target crime-prone communities
  - » Need whole-of-government responses
4. For these young people universal services and holistic approaches
  - » Evidence based interventions
    - Prevent initiation of offending
    - Prevent repeat offending
5. Custodial sentences are the least effective and most damaging interventions
  - » Use of imprisonment as a last resort