



Dear Editor

As a legal service representing young people under 25 and supporter of a coalition, Smart Justice for Young People*, we respond to the article by Aleks Devic, Herald Sun on June 3, 2013 looking at youth offending and Children's Court data.

We extend our sympathy to the victims of violent crime such as the offending graphically described in the article.

We note that according to Victoria Police Crime statistics from 2011-12, 14 to 24 year olds make up the majority of victims of offences of homicide, rape and robbery.

The second part of the article looking at Children's Court data suggests a significant escalation in youth crime and uses language such as "*teenage thugs*" and "*kiddie crims*" that opportunistically and unfairly shapes public perceptions of young people.

Such statistics need to be reported on in balanced not selective way, that builds on what we already know about the youth offending.

We know the number of young people committing offences accounts a small percentage of all young people under the age of 18 in Victoria.

We know the overwhelming majority of young people who do come before the courts have committed crimes against property or public transport related offences. Yesterday's article does not make clear the significant number of minor matters finalised through infringement system.

Victoria Police data from 2011-12¹ and the Children's Court's annual report do not indicate a huge spike in youth offending. While there is an increase in crimes against the person, especially assaults, much of this has been attributed by Victoria Police to family violence related assaults.

We know most young people who are involved with the police and first offences before the age of 18 will not commit any other offences, as they tend to 'grow out' of crime from late adolescence onwards.

We know, and the article confirms, that only a small number of young offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime.

¹ <http://www.police.vic.gov.au/crimestats/crimestats2011-12.pdf>, p43

We know serious and repeat youth offenders are overwhelmingly highly damaged young people, many of whom have experienced severe childhood neglect and physical abuse.²

Research tells us that one in four children with youth justice orders in 2010 came from less than 3% of Victoria's lower socio economic postcodes.³ Indeed the article identifies some crime 'hot spots' areas of Melbourne such as Dandenong, Ringwood, Sunshine & Heidelberg, all with many low socio-economic indicators and high density of risk factors for youth offending.

The Children's Court and youth justice system have a high level of expertise to address the offending and underlying issues of these young people.

So rather than an article pandering to a section of the community who want tougher sentencing, the community would be better served by a consideration of how we can better address the underlying drivers of youth offending especially responding to earlier trauma and abuse experienced by many young offenders.

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*** Smart Justice for Young People represents over 30 organisations from the youth, legal and community sectors advocating for smart, evidence-based approaches to youth justice.**

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² Weatherburn, D.; Cush, R. & Saunders, P. 'Screening juvenile offenders for further assessment and intervention', *Crime and Justice Bulletin* No 109. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2007.

³ Jesuit Social Services, 2013.