

Getting smarter about crime



HUGH DE KRETZER

THE lead-up to a state election is a dangerous time for the criminal justice system.

Politicians often compete to offer up flawed justice policies designed to sound good to voters.

These policies often don't work, divert resources from policies that do work and can sometimes do more harm than good.

Take the current knife amnesty.

On its face, it looks like a good policy — it's cheap and it takes some knives out of the community.

For the politicians, it generates some photo opportunities that show they're doing something to combat our "growing knife culture".

Yet, when you look at the research on knife carrying, it casts doubt on knife amnesties.

Knives are not like guns. They're readily available in any kitchen drawer and there are many lawful reasons for carrying them.

Research shows that it's mainly young boys who carry knives illegally and the main reason they do it is fear for their own safety.

Stop and search powers are not used randomly. They are used predominantly on young men.

Police are targeting the very people who need to feel the police are there to protect them.

The Victorian Government admits the new powers breach Victorians' human rights and leading criminologists tell us that aggressive policing of young people may aggravate the problem, not mitigate it.

The education campaign, Knives Scar Lives, is generally a good development.

Unfortunately the good policies tend to get drowned out by the bad, which are often perceived to be better at winning votes.

We need to promote good solutions and inform the debate so the public has information to properly judge policies themselves.

This is what the Smart Justice Project is about.

Leading community and legal organisations with vast experience working in the criminal justice system with both victims and offenders, have formed a coalition to promote justice policies that work and that respect Victorians' human rights.

We are passionate about reducing violence and crime, which is why we've joined together to promote smart justice.

Hugh de Kretser is the executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) and spokesperson for the Smart Justice Project which is being launched on Thursday.
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