

Smart Justice

“Smart action for a safer community”

Preventing crime the smart way

The starting point to preventing crime is understanding what causes crime. Publicly, politicians tend to oversimplify crime prevention policy, arguing that ‘more police equals less crime’.¹ In the lead up to the Victorian election, the Coalition has promised 1,600 more police at a cost of \$344 million and the ALP has promised an additional 1,770 police, at a cost of \$561 million.² Yet studies suggest that more police do not necessarily reduce crime and there are better and cheaper ways of reducing crime through investment in programs that tackle the causes of crime.³

What causes crime?

No single factor causes crime. While there is debate about the importance of various factors, most agree that multiple factors cause crime, and causes of criminal behaviour vary between different people and between different types of crimes.⁴

The overall crime rate is affected by a number of factors, including:

- the number of people who become involved in crime;
- the rate at which these people commit offences; and
- the length of time people stay involved in crime.⁵

Lowering the crime rate involves addressing each of these factors: from early intervention with young people at risk of involvement in crime, to working with those with substantial criminal histories to address the causes of reoffending.

Justice reinvestment - preventing crime the smart way

A cost effective way of preventing crime is to tackle its causes through criminal justice policies such as justice reinvestment. Justice reinvestment diverts a portion of the funds spent on prisons to local communities. The money is then reinvested in programs and services that address the underlying causes of crime in that community. International research indicates that there is a very strong financial case for investing substantial resources in more preventative work with former prisoners; those with drug and alcohol problems; people with mental illnesses and young people on the outskirts of the criminal justice system.⁶ For example, in the US state of Kansas where justice reinvestment has been implemented, there has been a 7.5% reduction in their prison population; parole revocation is down by 48%; and the reconviction rate for parolees has dropped by 35%.⁷

Reinvesting in early prevention

Typically, young offenders start getting involved in crime somewhere between 12 and 16 years of age. Most of these young people have one or two contacts with the criminal justice system and do not reoffend, while a small proportion commit more serious offences and eventually enter the adult criminal justice system.⁸ Early intervention programs targeted at these at-risk young people are therefore an effective way to reduce crime.

One of the strongest risk factors in young offending is neglect of children by parents.⁹ Research shows that this risk factor can be reduced through other supportive relationships with family, school and the community. Early intervention and positive support structures for young people is a critical part of long-term crime prevention.

Early intervention strategies worth investing in across Victoria include the Ropes program and the Right Step program. In the Ropes program, young people who have committed a single offence attend a full day course along with the police officer who charged them. Participants are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and work with police to achieve a common goal and if they successfully complete the course, the criminal record for the offence is struck out. While the program is currently being evaluated, preliminary results indicate that the program has lowered rates of reoffending.¹⁰

Youth Connect's Right Step Program is only currently available at the Moorabbin Justice Centre in Melbourne. It is an eight week therapeutic program which involves drug, alcohol and family counselling, guidance, life skill coaching, alternative education and career planning to overcome the causes of a young person's offending behaviour.¹¹

Investing in people not prisons

Poverty, unemployment and alcohol abuse are also risk factors for offending.¹² Poverty does not cause crime itself but it is a major problem experienced by people coming out of prison—being in prison exacerbates poverty and is part of a cycle of disadvantage that increases the risk of reoffending.¹³ Research indicates that reducing disadvantage and increasing income equality will reduce crime.¹⁴ Similarly, there is evidence that providing stable housing, employment opportunities and post prison release support can reduce reoffending.¹⁵

Despite this evidence, analysis by the Victorian Council of Social Service has shown that since the 2000-01 State Budget, Victorian Government spending increases on prisons and police have outstripped spending increases in areas likely to help reduce crime such as child protection, mental health and housing.¹⁶ More prisons and police are diverting resources away from cost effective ways of preventing crime.

There is also a high rate of mental illness among people who have been in prison¹⁷ and a significant portion of these people are receiving little or no care.¹⁸ Part of the solution may be to invest in diversion and support programs.¹⁹ The Assessment and Referral Court pilot program at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court provides specialist support for people with a mental illness and/or a cognitive impairment including clinical assessment, welfare and mental health referral and drug and alcohol treatment. While the program has not yet been evaluated and is only available to people who plead guilty to the charges, it aims to reduce the number of people with mental impairment in prison. Other court programs that address the causes of crime have been shown to reduce reoffending.²⁰

Smart justice solutions

- greater investment in programs that tackle the causes of crime rather than greater investment in police and prisons;
- greater investment in early therapeutic and diversionary interventions particularly for at risk young people; and
- expanding court programs which address the causes of offending.

*This factsheet was produced on
11 November 2010*

- 1 'Brumby, Hulls and Cameron discuss budget announcement of more police', Media conference transcript, (2010).
- 2 Victorian Liberal Nationals Coalition, 'Coalition announces 1,600 additional police to make our streets safe again', Media Release (6 April 2010) and Brumby '1,966 more police: Brumby's frontline focus', Media Release (28 April 2010).
- 3 Kleck, 'Do More Police Lead to More Crime Deterrence?', *Crime & Delinquency* (2010) and Weatherburn, *Law and Order in Australia: Rhetoric and Reality* (2004), 85-97 and 179-182.
- 4 Rose, 'Poverty and Crime' in Serr (ed), *Thinking about poverty* (2006), 107-108. See also Weatherburn, above n 3, 52-80.
- 5 Adapted from Weatherburn, above n 3, 56.
- 6 House of Commons, Justice Committee, First Report, 'Cutting crime: the case for justice reinvestment' (2009), para 127.
- 7 Australian Human Rights Commission submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Inquiry on Access to Justice (2009), 9-10.
- 8 Rose, above n 4, 108; Weatherburn, above n 3, 57.
- 9 Weatherburn, above n 3, 62-3; Rose, above n 4, 109.
- 10 Youthlaw submission to Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee Inquiry into strategies to prevent high volume offending and recidivism by young people (2008) and Grant, 'Interventions that work: dealing with young people in conflict with the law', AIC International conference paper (2008), 3.
- 11 Youth Connect, 'Right Step: Supporting young people out of the Justice System', Media Release (14 October 2009).
- 12 Weatherburn, above n 3, 52-80 and Rose, above n 4, 107-108.
- 13 Rose, above n 4, 110-111.
- 14 Weatherburn, above n 3, 190-197, Rose, above n 4, 107-110 and Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (2009), 144.
- 15 Employment can reduce re-offending by between a third and a half: UK Home Office, *Breaking the circle: A report on the review of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act* (2002). See also Rose, above n 5, 116.
- 16 www.vcoos.org.au/what-we-do/state-budget/2010-11Analysis/overview.htm.
- 17 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National survey of mental health and wellbeing 2007: Summary of results 2008*.
- 18 National Justice Chief Executive Officers' Group, *Diversion and support of offenders with a mental illness: Guidelines for best practice* (2010), 2.
- 19 National Justice Chief Executive Officers' Group, *Diversion and support*, 18. Such programs should ensure they support and enhance participants' human rights and protect their legal rights. This is set out in the guidelines at 35.
- 20 Neighbourhood Justice Centre, *Evaluating the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Yarra 2007-2009* (2010), p ii. Department of Justice, *Court Integrated Services Program: Executive Summary Evaluation Report*, (2010). Weatherburn, Jones, Snowball & Hua 'The NSW Drug Court: A re-evaluation of its effectiveness' (2008) *Crime and Justice Bulletin* 121; NSW Bureau of Crime and Justice Statistics.