

# Expanding Adult Time, Adult Crime and Taking a Strong Stance on Drugs and Anti-Social Behaviour Amendment Bill 2026

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## **Childhood Experiences is the Primary Driver of Crime**

A growing body of international research demonstrates that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are one of the strongest predictors of both juvenile and adult criminal offending. ACEs include exposure to abuse, neglect, family violence, parental substance abuse, mental illness in caregivers, and household instability during childhood.

Research across multiple countries consistently shows that individuals with higher numbers of ACEs are significantly more likely to experience poor health, addiction, homelessness, incarceration, and involvement in violent crime.

The current justice system largely responds to criminal behaviour after harm has occurred, rather than addressing the root causes that contribute to the development of offending behaviour. Increasing evidence indicates that unresolved childhood trauma, particularly when experienced across generations, contributes to cycles of violence and offending.

This submission recommends a shift toward trauma-informed prevention and early intervention strategies, alongside appropriate accountability within the justice system, in order to reduce long-term crime rates and break intergenerational cycles of trauma.

## **Background**

Adverse Childhood Experiences were first systematically studied in the landmark research conducted by [Vincent Felitti](#) and [Robert Anda](#) through the [Adverse Childhood Experiences Study](#).

The study identified ten key childhood adversities including:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- physical or emotional neglect
- exposure to domestic violence
- parental substance abuse
- parental mental illness
- incarceration of a parent
- parental separation or divorce
- chronic household instability

Subsequent research has confirmed that the cumulative number of ACEs strongly predicts later life outcomes, including criminal behaviour.

### **The Link Between Childhood Trauma and Criminal Behaviour**

Research consistently demonstrates that individuals with multiple ACEs are far more likely to become involved in criminal activity.

Key findings include:

- Individuals with four or more ACEs are several times more likely to become involved in violent offending.
- High ACE scores are strongly associated with substance abuse, aggression, impulsivity and risk-taking behaviours.
- Childhood trauma affects brain development, particularly areas responsible for impulse control, emotional regulation and threat perception.

The result is that many individuals who enter the criminal justice system have experienced significant unresolved trauma during childhood.

### **Generational Trauma and Crime**

Trauma does not occur in isolation. It is frequently intergenerational.

Children who grow up in environments characterised by violence, addiction, poverty or neglect are more likely to:

- experience trauma themselves
- develop maladaptive coping behaviours
- replicate similar environments in adulthood

This creates cycles of disadvantage and trauma that can persist across multiple generations.

Parents who experienced trauma as children may struggle with:

- emotional regulation
- substance dependency
- attachment difficulties
- parenting capacity

Without intervention, these patterns contribute to a cycle in which trauma continues to be transmitted through families and communities.

### **Impact on Juvenile Offending**

Juvenile justice research consistently shows that young offenders have significantly higher rates of trauma exposure than the general population.

Many young offenders have experienced:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- family violence
- neglect
- parental incarceration
- homelessness or housing instability

These experiences can lead to behavioural responses such as:

- aggression
- impulsivity
- hypervigilance
- difficulty forming healthy relationships
- poor emotional regulation

These factors can contribute to patterns of criminal behaviour later in life.

### **Economic and Social Costs**

Failure to address childhood trauma results in significant costs to society.

These include:

- policing and court costs
- incarceration
- mental health treatment
- substance abuse treatment
- child protection intervention
- lost productivity
- intergenerational welfare dependency

Research consistently shows that early intervention and prevention programs produce far greater long-term economic benefits than reactive justice responses alone.

Without early intervention, these behaviours often escalate into more serious offending during adulthood.

Research among prison populations also shows that people with multiple ACEs are much more likely to experience mental illness, self-harm and poor psychological wellbeing.

Research consistently shows that people in prison have experienced far higher levels of childhood trauma than the general population.

For example:

- A survey of prisoners in Wales found 84% of prisoners experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), compared with about 46% in the general population.
- 46% of prisoners reported four or more ACEs, compared with only around 12% in the wider community.
- Individuals with four or more ACEs were four times more likely to have spent time in youth detention.

Similarly, research from Canada found that 80% of male offenders and 86% of female offenders had experienced at least one ACE, with many experiencing multiple forms of trauma.

These findings demonstrate that childhood trauma is disproportionately represented among people involved in the criminal justice system.

A study of young people under youth justice supervision in Australia found:

- 89% had experienced a combination of abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction during childhood.
- Many also showed clinical levels of trauma symptoms and substance abuse issues.
- Individuals with four or more ACEs have significantly higher rates of arrest and incarceration.
- Youth exposed to childhood maltreatment are around 50% more likely to engage in later criminal behaviour.

Childhood trauma can significantly affect brain development and emotional regulation.

Exposure to chronic stress and abuse during childhood can alter brain systems involved in:

- impulse control
- threat perception
- emotional regulation
- decision-making

These findings suggest that trauma exposure is a major pathway into juvenile offending.

Without intervention, these environments can reproduce similar experiences for the next generation, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and criminal justice involvement.

This pattern is commonly referred to as intergenerational trauma, and it has been widely documented in criminology and public health research.

### **The Need for Trauma-Informed Policy**

Addressing crime effectively requires recognition that trauma is a major underlying driver of offending behaviour. The evidence indicates that addressing childhood trauma is one of the most effective long-term strategies for reducing crime.

This does not excuse criminal conduct. However, it highlights the importance of addressing the underlying conditions that contribute to criminal pathways.

A trauma-informed approach focuses on:

- early intervention
- prevention of childhood adversity
- support for vulnerable families
- rehabilitation programs that address trauma

These strategies aim to reduce the likelihood that trauma will manifest as criminal behaviour later in life.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **1. Expand Early Childhood Intervention Programs**

Investment in early childhood support services can reduce the likelihood of trauma exposure.

Programs should focus on:

- parenting support
- early childhood education

- family counselling
- domestic violence prevention
- substance abuse treatment for parents
- Trauma informed justice responses
- More youth diversion programs

## **2. Implement Trauma-Informed Schools**

Schools are often the first institutions to identify children experiencing trauma.

Training educators to recognise and respond to trauma can improve outcomes and reduce behavioural escalation.

## **3. Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Programs**

Youth justice systems should include programs that address trauma, emotional regulation and psychological support rather than focusing solely on punishment.

## **4. Support for At-Risk Families**

Providing targeted support to families experiencing multiple risk factors can reduce the likelihood of trauma being transmitted to the next generation.

## **5. Rehabilitation Programs within the Justice System**

Where individuals enter the justice system, rehabilitation programs addressing trauma, addiction and emotional regulation can reduce reoffending rates.

## **Conclusion**

Evidence from decades of research demonstrates that Adverse Childhood Experiences are a major contributing factor in the development of criminal behaviour.

Addressing childhood trauma through early intervention, family support and trauma-informed services represents one of the most effective long-term strategies for reducing both juvenile and adult crime.

Breaking the cycle of generational trauma requires coordinated policy responses that prioritise prevention alongside accountability.

A justice system that addresses both the consequences and the causes of crime is more likely to achieve lasting reductions in offending and improve community safety.