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Crime Inquiry 2014
Submission 010

I make this submission as an individual citizen to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee.

Grazia Catalano


I have over many years worked and studied in areas including education, youth development, youth justice and crime prevention, the adult criminal and forensic systems and disability services. My philosophy and practice in these areas preference prevention and early intervention.

I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission the Committee's Inquiry on strategies to prevent and reduce criminal activity in Queensland.

The Committee will no doubt receive considerable input from the fields of welfare and criminology with respect to the very good research which has been undertaken in those fields with respect to crime prevention, intervention, individual treatment and support and rehabilitation. Both theoretical and empirical research continue to illustrate the nexus of poverty and criminal behaviour (Kramer, 2007) and that over time experiences of economic exclusion will reinforce cultures of social exclusion (Oxoby, 2009).

I would like to use this submission to address the issue of the role of family in prevention and early intervention.

It should not be assumed that the prevalence in our schools and communities of children with poor behaviour are simply the result of poor parenting and anti-social and pro-crime home environments.

While much of the literature in criminology accentuates the influence of dysfunctional families in youth delinquency and later crime, there has been little recognition by criminologists of the nature and extent of cognitive impairments and behavioural disorders from childhood amongst offenders

More specifically I would like to address the role of the family of a child with mild to borderline intellectual impairment and/or behavioural disorders. Generally, these are children and families who do not access special education or disability services. However, the parental effort in relation to those children and their nurturing is most challenging. Persons with mild to borderline intellectual impairment are highly over-represented in the criminal justice system(Hayes, 2004, Bennett, 2005).

While over 15% of the population has been shown in studies to have IQ scores indicating mild intellectual disability, their disability is often hidden in adulthood (Lounds Taylor, 2008).

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This study by Lounds Taylor et al examined the effect and life outcomes on the siblings of persons with mild intellectual disability. Siblings reported more psychological distress and less psychological well-being compared with the norm. Families dealing with a member with impairment and disorders suffer the effects to varying degrees across all the members of that family.

Studies have examined the impact on mothers with children with autism whose children engage in inappropriate behaviour in public. Gill and Liamputting describe the emotional distress to mothers when there is public display of hostility toward the parent of the child with challenging behaviour (Gill, 2009). Studies by Chou et al found a high level of depressive symptoms from 64%-72% amongst parents of adult children with intellectual disabilities. In those families where social support was made available, the level of depressive symptoms was lower (Chou, 2010). Similar research into the health related stress of parents caring for children with disruptive behaviours provides some insight to the positive effects of having some social support which acknowledges the challenges being faced by these parents (Pruchno, 2004).

Unfortunately, parents dealing with children with disruptive behaviours that are not seen to be as a result of significant developmental delay or diagnosed autism face ongoing critical responses in the community.

The environmental view of crime as put forward by Gottfredson and Hirschi (Gottfredson, 1990) purports that poor parenting is responsible for poor self-control in children and that lack of self-control is one of the most significant causes of crime. They describe the cycle of low self-control and crime when those with poor self-control themselves become parents. Still on this line of argument, Wiebe believes that:

“Parenting by persons with low self-control is likely to be ineffective at best and abusive or neglectful at worst, providing a poor environment for the development of self-control and prosocial tendencies...” p.358 (Wiebe, 2012).

While I cannot dismiss the existence of evidence through research that illustrates this cycle of low self-control and crime, it must also be recognised that there are neurobiological causes of low self-control.

The recent work of Collins examines and links neurobiology to risk-taking behaviour, sensation seeking and aggressive behaviour, often associated with head injury and cognitive impairments (Collins, 2008).

In fact, a number of clinical studies have amplified the connections between mild to borderline intellectual impairment, and/or ADHD, poor self-control, aggressive behaviour and offending amongst children and young people. (Savlainen, 2010, Gillberg, 2000).

We should pay attention to data that highlights that children who are seen to have borderline intellectual impairment or attention disorders do not generally receive special education assistance. We should note that the research shows us that young people with mild to borderline intellectual impairment suffer low self-esteem and high levels of anxiety and stigma. This explains then why young people avoid any attempt to label them as requiring disability assistance (Jahoda, 2010). We should note that this stigma remains a significant impediment to service access for adults with cognitive deficiencies (Craig, 2002).

Parents and families of children experiencing difficulties as a result of mild to borderline intellectual impairment and behaviour disorders need assistance.

Many young men who are involved in the criminal justice system are young fathers. Studies of young men to age 24, such as that by Sotiri in NSW (Sotiri, 2007) highlight the relationship between ADHD, conduct disorder, and borderline intellectual disability, difficulty exercising self-control, suffering depression and involvement in the criminal justice system. We also know that health and social services fail to reach these men and their socio-economic difficulties limit connection with their children (Deslauriers, 2012).

Support to families experiencing pressures from raising a child or children with mild to borderline intellectual impairment and/or behavioural disorders needs to be accessible without too many hurdles and it needs to be for whatever purposes the family believes will contribute to the family's well-being. These parents will value a support program using strategies that are flexible and informal, that are minimally intrusive into and non-judgemental of the parenting role, and that enables them to meet their children's educational and developmental needs but also allows them as parents to offer their children fun and enjoyment that is so important to children's positive development and the well-being of the family.

Recommendation

That the Australian and Queensland Governments develop family support funding to vulnerable and disadvantaged families in which young fathers are involved in the criminal justice system and where they or their children are considered to have borderline intellectual impairment and conduct/ behavioural disorders. Such a program should not be targeted as a disability support program but as a family support program as part of a broader strategy to prevent and reduce the rates of offending and recidivism. The program needs to be flexible and unstructured and its parameters to be determined by the target families.

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