Crime Inquiry 2014 Submission 017



# Crime prevention

Submission to the inquiry on strategies to prevent and reduce criminal activity in Queensland



16 July 2014





### Introduction

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is Queensland's leading force for social change, working to eliminate poverty and disadvantage. With more than 600 members, QCOSS undertakes informed advocacy and supports a strong community service sector.

QCOSS's key activities focus on providing effective policy advice, working to strengthen responsive community services and having productive partnerships with government, private sector, the media and the sector. This work is done with a Queensland free of poverty and disadvantage front of mind.

QCOSS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee inquiry on strategies to prevent and reduce criminal activity in Queensland.

QCOSS strongly supports strategies which target the underlying causes of criminal activity. There is overwhelming evidence that a significant proportion of people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system have experienced lives characterised by social exclusion<sup>1</sup>, unstable living arrangements, childhood abuse and neglect<sup>2</sup>, difficulties with education<sup>3</sup> and finding employment<sup>4,5</sup>, poverty and inequality<sup>6</sup>, alcohol and drug use, mental illness, intellectual disability<sup>7</sup> and non-supportive personal relationships<sup>8</sup>.

QCOSS calls on the state government to adopt a *developmental* approach to crime prevention and recommends that investment be targeted at communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage to address the underlying risk factors associated with criminal behaviour. Doing so will reduce the incidence of crime and ensure that disadvantaged Queenslanders participate in the prosperity that our state has to offer.

#### Key recommendations

QCOSS recommends that the following priority actions be taken to reduce the risk factors associated with criminal behaviour:

- use a justice reinvestment approach to target resources and support at communities with high rates of poverty and disadvantage which are known to produce high numbers of chronic offenders
- improve access to early childhood development opportunities for children experiencing poverty and disadvantage and increase support for vulnerable parents to assist them to improve child development outcomes
- provide assistance for people at risk of long-term unemployment by providing targeted, tailored and flexible assistance to overcome barriers to employment and reduce the risk that children will grow up in jobless households.





### Risk and protective factors for criminal behaviour

... families at risk of poverty, abuse, inept parenting and relationship breakdown are more likely to produce young people at risk of substance abuse and criminality.<sup>9</sup>

A *developmental* approach to crime prevention seeks to address future criminal behaviour by reducing risk factors and strengthening the protective factors known to be associated with criminal behaviour<sup>10</sup>. A developmental approach to crime prevention takes a life course approach identifying transition points where interventions are most effective at reducing the potential for future criminality. This approach acknowledges that early intervention is required to lesson risk factors and build protective factors.

In reviewing the efficacy of national and international interventions, Homel *et al* (1999) have summarised the risk and protective factors associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour (see Appendix 1)<sup>11</sup>.

#### Target crime prevention activities

It is important that families and children in most need of assistance have access to the resources required to address the risk factors associated with criminal behaviour. As Farrington (2003) has found there are a range of risk factors that contribute to a pathway to juvenile crime that are potentially modifiable. Unfortunately, disadvantaged families lack access to the basic resources and supports to modify these risk factors<sup>12</sup>.

Effective crime prevention policies should include interventions to support families, promote positive parenting and enhance school readiness amongst others as a means of reducing criminal behaviour in the future. Resources and support should be targeted at particular groups who are overrepresented in crime statistics. One way of achieving this is targeting locations which produce a high number of chronic offenders.

One specific group which is overrepresented in the crime statistics are chronic offenders. Chronic offenders are those individuals who account for a large proportion of all offences. This group comprise between three and 11 per cent of offenders but account for 27 to 33 per cent of all offences<sup>13</sup>. Because chronic offenders account for a high proportion of the costs of crime, targeting interventions at this group may be a cost effective crime prevention strategy.

Allard *et al* (2013) have shown that it is possible to identify specific locations which produce a high proportion of chronic offenders by mapping the location where chronic offenders first come into contact with the criminal justice system. They argue that these locations are characterised by high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Given that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face significant social and economic disadvantage it is no surprise that Indigenous Australians are overrepresented in the chronic offender group<sup>14</sup>.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in crime statistics and are incarcerated at a rate far above that of the general population. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people far exceeds that of the non-Indigenous population. In 2011-12, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people aged 10-17 were 25.7 times more likely to be in youth detention than non-Indigenous young people<sup>15</sup>.



#### Table 1: Risk and Protective factors associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour<sup>16</sup>

		Risk Factors		
child factors	family factors	school context	life events	community and
prematurity	Parental characteristics:	school failure	divorce and family	cultural factors Socioeconomic
low birth weight	teenage mothers	normative beliefs about	break up	disadvantage
disability	single parents	aggression	war or natural	population density and
prenatal brain damage	psychiatric disorder,	deviant peer group	disasters	housing conditions
birth injury	especially depression	bullying	death of a family member	urban area
low intelligence	substance abuse	peer rejection	member	neighbourhood violence and crime
difficult temperament	criminality	poor attachment to school		cultural norms
chronic illness	antisocial models	inadequate behaviour		concerning violence as
insecure attachment	Family environment:	management		acceptable response to frustration
poor problem solving	family violence and disharmony			media portrayal of
beliefs about aggression	marital discord			violence
attr butions	disorganised			lack of support services
poor social skills	negative interaction/social			social or cultural
low self esteem lack of empathy	isolation			discrimination
alienation	large family size			
hyperactivity/disruptive	father absence			
behaviour	long term parental unemployment			
impulsivity	Parenting style:			
	poor supervision and			
	monitoring of child discipline style (harsh or			
	inconsistent)			
	rejection of child			
	abuse			
	lack of warmth and affection			
	low involvement in child's activities			
	neglect			
	P	rotective Factors		
child factors	family factors	school context	life events	community and cultural factors
social competence	supportive caring parents	positive school climate	meeting significant	access to support
social skills	family harmony	prosocial peer group	person	services
above average intelligence	more than two years	responsibility and	moving to new area	community networking
attachment to family	between siblings	required helpfulness	opportunities at critical	attachment to the community
empathy	responsibility for chores or required helpfulness	sense of belonging/ bonding	turning points or major life	participation in church or
problem solving	secure and stable family	opportunities for some	transitions	other community group
optimism	supportive relationship	success at school and		community/cultural
school achievement easy temperament	with other adult	recognition of achievement		norms against violence
internal locus of control	small family size	school norms concerning		a strong cultural identity and ethnic pride
moral beliefs	strong family norms and morality	violence		
values				
self related cognitions				





The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system continues into adulthood. The total adult prisoner population identifying as Indigenous was 27 per cent at 30 June 2013<sup>17</sup>.

While the risk factors for Indigenous offending are similar to those for the wider population: being young; male; low socio-economic status; poor education; unemployment; substance use, there are risk factors specific to Indigenous people, including forced removal, dependence on government, and racism that must be addressed to reduce the incidence of offending<sup>18</sup>.

Allard *et al* recommend that it would be efficient and effective to invest in systemic interventions that address the multiple dimensions of disadvantage faced by communities producing high numbers of chronic offenders.

Many of the communities where a high proportion of chronic offenders first had contact with the criminal justice system had extreme social and economic disadvantage. As such, these locations may benefit from community-wide programs that target the risk factors for offending by reducing substance abuse and unemployment and improving educational levels and housing conditions (Allard 2010). International evidence indicates that addressing community-wide risk factors through Vocational and Education Training, or community economic development, may reduce offending (Burghardt et al. 2001; McCord, Widom & Crowell 2001; Sherman et al. 1997)<sup>19</sup>.

The work undertaken by Allard *et al* provides an evidence base for applying a justice reinvestment approach in Queensland. A justice reinvestment approach would require taking a portion of the funds spent on incarceration and redirecting this investment at locations producing chronic offenders to address social and economic inequalities at the individual, family and community level<sup>20</sup>. Redirecting funds spent on incarceration to communities experiencing significant poverty and disadvantage will reduce the incidence of crime by providing opportunities for young people at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.

#### Early childhood development

Early childhood provides a critical time in the development of children. It is a juncture where there are significant opportunities to the build protective factors that lessen the chance of future criminal behaviour. The years from pre-birth to six are a critical time for brain development in children, which impacts heavily on the future health and wellbeing of individuals and their future life opportunities, including meaningful employment and productive engagement in society.

There are two main avenues to promote early childhood development: by providing children with access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and by providing support to parents to assist them in enhancing child development outcomes.

One of the most effective ways of supporting young children and families is by facilitating participation in quality ECEC. Participation in quality ECEC has been shown to have significant positive impacts on children's development, particularly for children from a disadvantaged background. As it has been noted, the early development of capacities that promote school readiness are important because:





[*I*]*ife trajectories for children become increasingly difficult to change as differences in skills and abilities become entrenched and initial differences between school ready and school unready children are amplified*<sup>21</sup>.

Participation in early childhood learning improves school readiness, strengthens educational outcomes<sup>22,23</sup> and contributes to improved outcomes in employment, health and other areas<sup>24,25</sup>.

To be accessible to vulnerable families, ECEC services should be affordable, culturally safe and provide access to practical supports for parents. Further investment is needed to roll out more early childhood learning centres as well as mechanisms to enable vulnerable families' greater access to services.

Parenting behaviours can also increase the risk of future offending. Australian studies have shown that there is a link between child maltreatment, neglect and the experience of family violence with future offending<sup>26</sup>. Poor parenting, characterised by harsh, erratic and inconsistent discipline, are clear risk factors for future delinquency. A recent New Zealand study has found, for example, that family circumstances (including parental alcohol abuse and offending) and parenting behaviours are correlated with future offending above other factors, such as ethnicity<sup>27</sup>.

Positive outcomes for children depend greatly on the capacities of parents or carers to provide conditions conducive to a child's learning and development. For vulnerable children and families, a combined approach, which targets both child and parent is more effective than a single intervention. Evidence from the Pathways to Prevention program in South-East Queensland, has shown that outcomes for young children can be improved when high quality early education is combined with interventions to support parents or carers (Homel *et al* 2006). Programs focused on family functioning have been shown to have success in reducing offending rates. Programs that target the family have been shown to reduce offending by between 13.3 percent and 52 percent<sup>28</sup>.

Vulnerable parents should be supported to access a range of services, such as advice and information about family functioning and child health and development, as well as referral to health services, literacy and other social services, which help them to engage better in their child's learning.

#### Employment

A significant risk factor for criminal behaviour is unemployment. Family joblessness and long-term unemployment are associated with an increased risk of criminal behaviour. Family joblessness is of particular concern because of the potentially negative impact on children. In Queensland in 2011, an estimated 14.3 per cent of all children under 15 were living in jobless households<sup>29</sup>. Family joblessness is a critical problem for a number of reasons.

On the one hand, family joblessness reduces household income, leads to dependence on government allowances, financial stress and entrenches poverty<sup>30</sup>. As Nickell (2004) has noted, there is a strong correlation between household joblessness and poverty, particularly child poverty<sup>31</sup>. Poverty has perverse impacts on future outcomes for children because persistent poverty damages a young child's cognitive development by reducing the capacity of parents or carers to positively contribute to a child's development (Rainsberry and Budge 2012). This increases the risk that a young person will struggle with education and the risk of engaging in criminal behaviour.





On the other hand, parental unemployment increases the risk that children will be unemployed in the future. Analysis of longitudinal data has shown, for example, that if a male parent was unemployed for a period of six months or more while their male child was growing up, there is a decreased likelihood of their child being employed as an adult<sup>32</sup>. It is well known that children in jobless families are at much higher risk of growing up jobless themselves contributing to a cycle of poverty and disadvantage<sup>33</sup>.

It is critical that disadvantaged young people at risk of long-term unemployment are provided with opportunities to attach to the labour market. Current statistics on youth unemployment show that it is increasingly difficult for young people to find employment<sup>34</sup>. Failure to support young people to gain employment increases the risk of criminal behaviour.

As Chapman *et al* (2014) have shown, long-term unemployment of male youth and criminal activity are related. They have estimated that eliminating long-term unemployment amongst males aged 15 to 24 would produce a seven per cent reduction in property crime in New South Wales per annum<sup>35</sup>. Any reduction in crime rates will therefore depend on the capacity of people not completing secondary school to quickly and easily find satisfactory employment<sup>36</sup>.

Breaking the cycle of unemployment requires targeted interventions to address the range of issues faced by individuals and families in this situation. Vulnerable families and individuals struggle to gain employment because they lack a number of basic skills required. Vulnerable families may simply not have the resources required to look for and secure work, which many people take for granted, especially if they have been out of work for a long period of time.

Improving employment outcomes depends greatly on overcoming educational deficiencies, which require early childhood interventions to improve school readiness as well as schoolage supports to assist young people at risk of not meeting basic standards or at risk of dropping out of school. This might require individually tailored or flexible learning opportunities both inside and outside of the school environment to ensure continued engagement with education and training<sup>37</sup>. Given the links between education and employment and unemployment and criminal behaviour, it vital that actions are taken to improve educational outcomes as means of preventing criminal behaviour in the future.

Individuals and families experiencing poverty and disadvantage also face a number of issues related to housing, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, disability, mental health and others that make it difficult to secure employment. They require access to flexible, tailored and hands on mentoring and support to help them to build the skills and confidence to gain employment. This level of support is not being adequately provided through the Job Services Australia network<sup>38</sup>. Programs that address these complex issues have been shown to have a positive employment outcomes for individuals facing poverty and disadvantage<sup>39</sup>.





## Conclusion

This submission has highlighted the importance of targeting investment at communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage as a means of addressing the underlying risk factors associated with criminal behaviour. QCOSS calls on the state government to adopt a *developmental* approach to crime prevention to reduce the incidence of crime. We recommend that the following priority actions be taken by government to reduce the risk factors associated with criminal behaviour:

- use a justice reinvestment approach to target resources and support at communities with high rates of poverty and disadvantage which are known to produce high numbers of chronic offenders
- improve access to early childhood development opportunities for children experiencing poverty and disadvantage and increase support for vulnerable parents to assist them to improve child development outcomes
- provide assistance for people at risk of long-term unemployment by providing targeted, tailored and flexible assistance to overcome barriers to employment and reduce the risk that children will grow up in jobless households.





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