

Youth Justice Reform Select Committee inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland

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Benefits of Early-Intervention and Prevention Programs:

- **Reduced Crime Rates:** Effective prevention programs can help reduce the incidence of youth crime. By identifying and addressing risk factors early, these programs can divert young people away from criminal behaviour, ultimately leading to lower crime rates in communities. Early-intervention programs need to be implemented into primary schools, for all children, to reduce the likelihood of future peer-pressure, anti-social behaviour and criminal activities.
- **Cost Savings:** Prevention is more cost-effective than responding to youth crime through the criminal justice system. The costs associated with law enforcement, court proceedings, and incarceration can be significantly higher than investing in prevention and intervention programs.
- **Improved Public Safety:** A reduction in youth crime contributes to overall public safety. Safer communities are more attractive for residents and businesses, which can lead to economic development and improved quality of life for all residents.
- **Positive Outcomes for Youth:** Early prevention strategies can help young people make better life choices. These programs provide opportunities for skill development, education, and personal growth, which can lead to positive outcomes such as increased employment opportunities and better mental health.
- **Breaking the Cycle:** Many individuals involved in youth crime come from families with a history of criminal behaviour. Early prevention programs can help break this cycle by addressing the underlying issues within families and providing support and resources to parents and caregivers.
- **Enhanced Social Cohesion:** Communities that invest in youth prevention programs often experience greater social cohesion and a sense of shared responsibility. When residents and community organisations work together to support young people, it fosters a sense of belonging and trust.
- **Long-Term Savings:** By preventing youth from becoming involved in criminal activities, society can avoid the long-term costs associated with incarceration, rehabilitation, and support for adults who have a history of criminal behaviour.
- **Positive Development:** Early prevention programs focus on promoting positive youth development, including academic success, social skills, and emotional well-being. This not only reduces the likelihood of criminal activity but also prepares young people for productive and responsible adulthood.
- **Reduced Victimisation & Recidivism:** Preventing youth crime means fewer victims of crime. Communities benefit from reduced property crime, violence, and the associated physical and emotional trauma experienced by victims.
- **Community Empowerment:** Early prevention strategies often involve collaboration among community organisations, schools, law enforcement, and other stakeholders.

This collaborative approach empowers communities to address the specific needs and challenges they face, leading to tailored and effective solutions.

What we do:

- Run early-intervention and preventative programs for young people at risk of disengaging from education and entering the youth justice system;
- Run intervention programs for young people who have disengaged from education and have entered the youth justice system;
- Run anti-bullying and anti-drug school talks and programs;
- Provide programs for students on school suspension, reducing the amount of young people committing offences in the community during school hours;
- Teach practical life-skills to equip young people with the tools they need to make positive choices;
- Connect young people with elderly and disadvantaged people in the community;
- Provide free programs and activities for young people in community, providing a safe place with mentors and good role models;
- Create a sense of purpose and belonging for young people;
- Use innovative techniques in programs that activate the underdeveloped part of the brain, to combat the effects of ADHD, which in turn can increase engagement in education and decrease the risk of anti-social behaviour that leads to committing crimes.

Costs - Prevention vs Repercussions

The average cost to run a 10 week (1 term) program is approximately \$10,000. The below table compares the cost of housing a young person in the Youth Justice System, compared to the cost of staffing Fight 4 Youth for 10 hour days, 5 days a week. It does not include the associated costs to taxpayers for QPS and the court system. Most weeks we have almost 300 people drop in and/or attend programs. This is based on our average up to 2023.

Cost per child	Youth Justice System		Fight 4 Youth preventative programs		Cost to run Fight 4 Youth	
	Daily	Annually	Daily	Annually	Daily	Annually
	\$2,068.32*	\$761,507.00*	\$5.43**	\$1,411.80**	\$1000	\$260,000
*Productivity Commission showed the annual operating cost of detaining a child in 2023.						
** Based on our average of 184 young people per week. Realistically, we have closer to 300 young people attend on an average week.						

Due to the impending increase in our rent of \$1000.00 per week, we are at risk of closing our doors.

ADHD/Disengagement from education and youth crime:

Studies have shown that:

- ADHD is an important risk factor for delinquency;
- Young people with ADHD have been associated with double the risk of arrest;
- Young people with ADHD have over three times the risk of having convictions;
- Young people with ADHD have almost three times the risk of a period of incarceration during adolescence;
- Young people with inattentive symptomatology are more likely to commit most forms of criminal conduct.

A meta-analysis of 42 studies showed that 25.5% of the prison population met diagnostic criteria for ADHD, this constituting nothing short of multiples of the prevalence in the general population.

My experience working in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, is that many young people who are detained have undiagnosed conditions, that are not being managed.

Figure 4 Youth are using innovative activities to help develop the part of the brain that is underdeveloped in many young people that have been diagnosed with ADHD. These activities aim to:

- Improve concentration;
- Improve information retention;
- Improve emotional control;
- Improve coordination;
- Improve discipline;
- Develop eye tracking, which helps with reading;
- Develop auditory processing, which helps hearing;
- And develop the vestibular system, which helps with balance.

Why our programs work:

After many years of working in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, The Brisbane City Watchhouse, and running programs in several adult prisons, I have seen great improvements in young people who have participated in the Fight 4 Youth programs.

Fight 4 Youth's programs teach young people the life skills they need to be able to cope with life in a positive way. These life-skills include:

- Self-Regulation – how to manage emotions in a healthy way;
- Understanding the consequences of fighting outside of a controlled environment, such as a boxing ring;
- How your view of everything is affected by your perception & perspective;
- Healthy boundaries and their effects;
- Peer-Pressure and it's effects;
- Consequences; looking at the devastating results of young people making similar choices;
- Identity & Values;
- Resilience & Perseverance;
- How to turn failure into success;
- Community Engagement – helping elderly and disadvantaged people in the community and seeing the benefits;
- Healthy Relationships (and what unhealthy relationships look like);
- Vaping, smoking, marijuana, alcohol and other drugs. Where it starts and finishes;
- Healthy Body; easy ways to make healthy choices;
- Budgeting in a practical way
- How to determine strengths and develop them, and set goals;
- Healthy Mind; dealing with the real issues – not just putting on a bandaid;
- Regrets of an Ex-Offender – special guest who's been where they have, with disastrous results.
- Ripple Effect – looking at the consequences and effects of choices.

We also look at how to turn interests into jobs and career opportunities and help to create resumes and apply for part-time work, whilst returning to education.

Most young people who are disengaged from education don't learn in traditional ways; we target multiple learning styles and use experiential learning to ensure best results.

My opinion is that people of any age who commit serious crimes, should have consequences that are appropriate to the crime. Repeat offenders should not be allowed out on bail. Ankle Monitoring Devices won't stop young people from committing crimes; it will only highlight where they are when they do them.

Almost all the young people that I have worked with in the community, detained at the Brisbane City Watchhouse, Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, and through various adult prisons, have expressed that a big part of why they continue to commit crimes is for 'street cred' (to impress their peers). Once a crime has been committed, I believe we should remove young people from their peers. One solution would be to send young offenders to remote stations requiring workers. If the 'reward' of being with their peers in detention or prison is removed, and the knowledge that their consequences will involve hard work, I believe many young people would not choose to commit the crime.

If young people from other countries commit serious crimes in our country, they should not have the privilege of staying in our country. If deportation was a consequence, there would be a massive reduction in crime. If the whole family were to be at risk of being deported, the families would be more vigilant in positively supporting their young people to make positive choices and seeking help when needed.

The majority of the young people I have worked with have stated, many times, that they **do not care** if they are arrested, charged and sent to detention. Many of them look forward to going back, for 'praise' from their peers. They have stated that they do not care if they end up in adult prisons. They have said that being sent to detention is not a punishment and often they will reoffend quickly so they can return to their peers.

One of the young people I worked with at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, upon pending release, would tell the staff to keep his room ready, as he would be back for dinner. Many times, this young person would go to the nearest shop, attempt a robbery, and sit and wait for the police to arrest him. This particular young person had told staff that he had told his lawyer that he would continue to commit crimes as soon as released, as he wanted to remain in detention. As alarming as this may sound, this was not uncommon. The majority of the young people in detention expressed this was their home, and they did not want to leave. When we talked about what would happen when they turned 18 and went to prison, they said they had 'family' there too.

The government should fund more early-intervention and prevention programs. This will be much more cost effective than trying to combat the effects of crime and will help many more people. Coupled with early-intervention is having a place to belong.

All young people are looking for their place; how they fit in – their tribe. If they can't find something healthy to belong to, they will look for something that isn't. When young people are encouraged and supported in a positive environment, there is no need to look for that 'support' elsewhere. Too many young people find that the only place they feel they belong is with criminals. We can prevent this from happening with early-intervention.

My experience working in the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre, is that many young people who are detained have undiagnosed conditions, that are not being managed. As it stands, the young people in detention have to give consent for these assessments, or to receive interventions. They usually will not consent, so these conditions remain unmanaged and worsen upon release. When a person is remanded, they already lose their right to freedom. Should it not be mandatory to receive the required interventions that the professionals deem appropriate?

The Blue Card system needs to be adjusted. There have been cases where paedophiles have been working in our local community in child-care related industries. They had valid blue cards. Some of these people also had complaints made about them, and they retained their card. Some of these people have since been charged with hundreds of crimes against children.

Fight 4 Youth works with reformed ex-offenders, whose lived-experiences can positively change the course of young offenders lives. They have all shown me their entire criminal history, as an official document, so I have been fully aware of their history. Due to the current restrictions, many of these people who have never committed violent crimes, or any crimes involving children, are unable to even apply for a blue card.

The only way we have been able to use their experiences, advice and life-lessons is by videoing their testimonies and stories, and sharing through our Inside Out program and in our school talks. Their presence would make a much greater impact on young people, especially as they could ask questions face to face. One of these men, who has completely turned his life around, studied to be a social worker. He still cannot get a blue card, and is unable to work in the career he studied and worked so hard for. It appears that some good people, who have paid for their mistakes through jail time and restorative justice practices, are continued to be punished by not being given a chance to pursue many careers. This not only prevents them from moving on and being a contributing member of society, but prevents them from being able to use their lived experiences to help stop others from making the same mistakes.