



# Our Story – The Youth Justice Board

## What is the problem?

Every child has a right to grow up in a society that allows them to flourish.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of things that get in the way of that happening. And generally it's not just one factor but a combination of factors.

Poverty, alcohol and drug misuse, impaired family relationships, cognitive impairment, negative peer group influences and intergenerational violence, abuse and trauma are all indicators of disadvantage.

They are also **risk** factors for youth involvement in crime.

## The context of childhood

When it comes to youth involvement in crime, some people blame the individual. Some people blame the parents. Some people blame society. But as far as we're concerned, it's not about apportioning blame. It's about finding solutions.

In addition to reducing or eliminating risk factors that increase the likelihood of young people getting caught up in crime, we can work to strengthen **protective** factors.

Protective factors include things like personal resilience; sense of self-efficacy; having a stable, warm, affectionate relationship with one or both parents; links with teachers and with other adults and peers who hold positive attitudes, and 'model' positive social behaviour; opportunities for involvement; education; prospects for employment; development of social and reasoning skills; recognition and due praise.

Children and youth tend to be influenced by the prevalent behaviour, norms and values held by those to whom they feel attached. Thus parents, teachers and community leaders who lead by example and hold clearly stated expectations regarding young people's behaviour are helping to protect them against risk.

As a community we can put measures in place to reduce or eliminate risk factors and strengthen protective factors.

## What's in our way?

Sometimes we forget that young offenders are young. We're so used to sensationalised and highly charged media reports about young offenders that we neglect to remember that they are children. A young person who gets involved in crime is still somebody's child. Like you, they are a daughter, a son, a niece, a nephew, a grandchild.

There's a lot of information out there about the causes of youth offending, who is likely to be a young offender, and what we can do about young offending.

But a lot of this information is ignored. A noisy minority seem to think that boot camps and locking up kids is the way to go. As far as we're concerned, this is a simplistic view of how to solve crime.

In most cases, the behavioural problems are simply a reflection of a troubled life. In order to address the behaviour, the overall life problems need to be addressed first. Therefore, it makes sense that the evidence shows locking up kids doesn't work.

We think it's about time that we use the information that we've got. We'd like to think that decisions that we make around the lives of these kids isn't a race to the bottom to see who can inflict the most severe punishment – nor is it about getting the most votes.

But we're not naïve. We know that sensationalism sells and that the "tough on crime" rhetoric gets votes. But year to year, nothing seems to change.

### What we know about young people and crime

- A small minority of children and youth, most of whom are disadvantaged, make up the cohort of young offenders.
- Aboriginal children and youth are significantly over-represented in the youth justice system.
- Children and youth are different to adults in that they are more susceptible to peer influence due to their stage of social, emotional and behavioural development.
- Disadvantaged children and youth are at greater risk of cognitive impairment, alcohol and other drug use, and they are more likely to be victims of crime.
- Most of the offences committed by children and youth are not violent in nature.

### What we can do

This is where we as a Board feel that we can make a difference.

We've been given the task of looking at the way youth justice is delivered in Western Australia and seeing how it can be improved.

We already know that:

- Imprisonment does not lower rates of reoffending and does nothing to address the underlying causes of offending – in fact, it can lead to children and young people getting stuck in the system
- By providing better and earlier access to support services and youth programs that address the causes of disadvantage, the community can intervene before these young people progress to serious offending
- Targeted early intervention programs for at-risk children and youth are a cost effective way to reduce crime
- Diverting young offenders away from the criminal justice system is the smarter way to prevent crime.

So, we're going to use the opportunity we have to make sure that:

- all decisions made around children and youth involved in crime are based on solid evidence and research
- we listen to the people who know – people who have done the studies, compiled the statistics and deal regularly with young people in the justice system
- we listen to what the children and youth involved in crime, their families and the communities they live in have to say.