

## **Australian Human Rights Commission – Youth Justice and Child Wellbeing Reform across Australia**

**Submission from Dr Chris Trotter Emeritus Professor Monash University Social Work Department and Dr Phillipa Evans, Senior Lecturer, UNSW Social Work Department.**

This submission focuses on the human rights for young people involved in the criminal justice system in Australia. In particular it focuses on the rights of young people to have their best interests as a primary consideration and it identifies reforms which show evidence of positive outcomes including reductions in ongoing involvement in youth justice systems. The submission is brief because the detail of the reforms is set out in the four attached articles. It focuses on three areas of work with young people in the criminal justice system. First the submission outlines evidence for a particular style of supervision which enhances outcomes for young people under supervision in the community on probation of other community based orders; second the submission outlines a specific approach to training and coaching of youth justice detention staff which has been shown to lead to positive outcomes for staff and young people; and third the submission refers to evidence based work with families of young people in criminal justice. In each case the evidence from international studies and our research in Australia indicates that young people are safer and offend less often if these evidence-based interventions are offered to them

### *Community Supervision*

Many studies undertaken in youth and adult corrections have found that high quality one to one supervision leads to positive outcomes. Two reviews of the studies have suggested that re-offending is lower when workers are trained in and make use of certain interpersonal skills. The reviews suggest that high level workers skills are associated with reductions in offending of around 30 percent on average (Trotter 2013, Chadwick et al 2015).

Our research undertaken in NSW Youth Justice confirms this research. We found that workers with good skills had substantially reduced recidivism rates (Trotter 2012) when supervised by workers using a particular style of supervision. The study involving the observation and coding of 117 interviews between young people on supervised community

orders and their youth justice caseworkers. The study found that when youth justice caseworkers demonstrated the use of certain skills those young people under their supervision offended less often. These skills include role clarification, pro-social modelling, problem solving and CBT skills, and relationship skills. The study found that more effective youth justice caseworkers were able to engage the young people but at the same time challenge their pro-criminal comments and actions.

Subsequent collaborative research with youth justice departments in NSW, Queensland and South Australia involved training and coaching in these practice skills (Trotter & Evans 2023). This research aimed to examine the extent to which training and coaching of youth justice caseworkers, across three state youth justice departments in Australia, improved the use of workers' skills. Audio-tapes of worker/client interviews were provided to research staff before and after training and coaching. Analysis of the audio-tapes found a significant increase in the overall use of worker skills following the training and coaching. The study concludes that outcomes for youth people can be improved if regular training and coaching in effective practice skills is offered to workers (Trotter & Evans 2023a).

#### *Evidence Based practice in Custody.*

There is less research relating to the impact of evidence-based practices in custody although there is some evidence that if similar skills are used in custodial settings outcomes for young people and staff are improved. NSW Youth Justice subsequently collaborated with Monash, Swinburne Universities and the University of NSW an Australian Research Council funded project which aimed to improve the social climate of youth detention. As outlined in the attached articles, social climate included the safety and wellbeing of detained young people and staff. The project, led by Professors, Chris Trotter, Rosemary Sheehan and James Ogloff and Dr Phillipa Evans, responds to national and international commentary about poor rehabilitative climate in youth detention. An innovative training and coaching program in practice skills including, role clarification, pro-social modelling and problem solving, was offered to staff in three NSW detention centres. The other three detention centres in the state formed a comparison group which did not receive the intervention. Six months and 12 months following the intervention social climate improved for staff and young people at the sites which received the intervention, at statistically significant levels for staff. There was

also a decrease in the number of assaults, separations and segregations at sites receiving the intervention. There were no comparable improvements in the sites not receiving the intervention. A peer reviewed publication by the investigators concluded that social climate, including safety, can be improved through dedicated training and coaching of staff (Trotter, Evans & Powers 2023).

### *Working with Families*

There is evidence that family issues are often related to offending and that family interventions can play a role in rehabilitation for youth in the criminal justice system. Reviews of research have suggested that working with family groups may be the most effective method of reducing re-offending among young people (see Trotter 2023 for a summary of the evidence). Over the past 15 years NSW Youth Justice has offered *Collaborative Family Work* to young people and their families in the western region of NSW. Research on the intervention funded by the Australian Research Council and New South Wales Youth Justice, found high rates of satisfaction with the intervention from probation officers and NGO caseworkers who delivered the family work and from youth and family members involved (Trotter 2017). The families also had high completion rates (most commonly completing about 6 sessions) with more than 80% completing the intervention when the work was undertaken in the family home. Youth involved in the family work also had lower recidivism at 6 months and at 2 years in comparison to comparison groups consisting of matched youth who were not offered the intervention and youth who declined to be involved in the intervention (Trotter, Evans & Baidawi 2022).

### *Summary*

The authors have been collaborating with youth justice in NSW for the past 15 years on projects in community supervision, youth detention and family work. Research projects have been funded by the Australian Research Council, the Australian Criminology Research Council and Monash, Swinburne Universities and University of NSW. Research on the projects has consistently shown improved outcomes for staff and young people. While what works and what doesn't work in youth justice is a contested issue, positive outcomes for both young people and staff have been found in each of the research projects detailed in this

submission. What distinguishes the interventions referred to in this submission is that they have been researched in Australian conditions with co-operation of Australian youth justice departments and reviewed and published in reputable international refereed journals. There is clear evidence that youth justice practices can be improved but the challenge is sustaining the implementation of these practices within the competing priorities of youth justice organisations.

## **References**

Chadwick N, Dewolf A, & Serin R (2015) Effectively training community supervision officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42(10), 977–989.

Trotter C (2012) Effective Supervision of Young Offenders *Trends and Issues in Criminal Justice* 448:1-9

Trotter C (2013) Reducing recidivism through probation supervision – What we know and don't know from four decades of research *Federal Probation* 77(2):9-15

Trotter, C. J. (2017). Working with families in youth justice. *Probation Journal*, 64(2), 94-107.

Trotter C (2023) *Working with Involuntary Clients* 4th Edition Routledge Abingdon, UK

Trotter C., Evans P., & Baidawi S., (2020) Collaborative Family Work in Youth Justice *Australian Social Work* 73(3) 267-279

Trotter, C., Evans, P., & Powers, T. (2022). Improving Social Climate In Youth Detention. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 3. Advance online publication. 8.7.2022

Trotter C & Evans P (2023a) Developing Evidence Based Practice Skills in Youth Justice *European Journal of Probation* 15(2) Published on line 25.6.2023

## **Articles included with this submission.**

The following articles are included with this submission. We are happy to discuss any of this material if that would be helpful.

Trotter C (2012) Effective Supervision of Young Offenders *Trends and Issues in Criminal Justice* 448:1-9

Trotter C., Evans P., & Baidawi S., (2020) Collaborative Family Work in Youth Justice  
Australian Social Work 73(3) 267-279

Trotter, C., Evans, P., & Powers, T. (2022). Improving Social Climate In Youth  
Detention. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 3.  
Advance online publication. 8.7.2022

Trotter C & Evans P (2023a) Developing Evidence Based Practice Skills in Youth Justice  
European Journal of Probation 15(2) Published on line 25.6.2023