

National Children's Commission
Youth Justice and Child Wellbeing Reform across Australia

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Project Questions

1. What factors contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Australia?
2. What needs to be changed so that youth justice and related systems protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people? What are the barriers to change, and how can these be overcome?
3. Can you identify reforms that show evidence of positive outcomes, including reductions in children's and young people's involvement in youth justice and child protection systems, either in Australia or internationally?
4. From your perspective, are there benefits in taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia? If so, what are the next steps?

My Main Argument

Australia's current obsession with "expensive and demonstrably ineffective deep end services" (McCarthy & Kerman, 2010; p.167) comes at the expense of a focus on *community-controlled, evidence-based, and data-guided primary prevention approaches that promote positive child and youth development*.

Reform of youth justice systems nationally must be undergirded by extensive investment in preventative innovations to reduce the flow of children into the carceral system. Scaffolded by the overriding policy principle of *proportionate universalism* (Dierckx et al., 2019), holistic interventions targeted at young children exhibiting hard-to-manage conduct problems should be embedded in universal programs which improve the wellbeing of all children.

Background and Focus

This submission does not address all the questions posed. It briefly addresses Q1 and Q4 but focusses mainly on Q3. My assumption is that many other organisations will address Q2, including the Justice Reform Initiative for which I am a Queensland Patron and active participant in the struggles for youth justice reform in Queensland.

I began work in 1972 on criminological research on the causes and prevention of crime, including place-based strategies to reduce crime and social disadvantage, under the tutelage of the late, great Professor Tony Vinson, AM, Foundation Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research where I served as statistician then Deputy Director.

Since taking up the Foundation Chair in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University in 1992 I have continued my work on crime prevention with a particular emphasis on developmental approaches to prevention and early intervention. The report, *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*, was published by the Commonwealth Department of the Attorney General in 1999 through an inter-disciplinary consortium that I convened and led. This report has had a major influence in Australia on policies in such diverse fields as mental health, substance abuse, child protection, and special education, but *has demonstrably failed in its main objective to make the primary prevention of youth crime in disadvantaged communities a national policy priority.*

Based on the findings of the Federal report, I developed the *Pathways to Prevention Project* in partnership with Griffith colleagues Dr Kate Freiberg and Dr Sara Branch and with Mission Australia and Education Queensland. The project operated for ten years (2002-2011) in the most disadvantaged area of Brisbane. This comprehensive early intervention program promoted both human and community development and shared first prize in the 2004 National Crime and Violence Prevention Awards. In April 2004, the Prime Minister announced a new multi-million-dollar program, *Communities for Children*, that was implemented in 52 disadvantaged communities across Australia. This program was strongly influenced by the learnings from *Pathways to Prevention*. On December 7, 2006, the Prime Minister launched a report on the first five years of the Pathways Project at Parliament House in Canberra.

Building on the Pathways Project, we embarked in 2013 on a major 8-year program, *Creating Pathways to Child Wellbeing in Disadvantaged Communities (the CREATE Project)*. This program operated within the framework of Communities for Children and was funded by the Australian Research Council and by our partners: the Department of Social Services, five NGOs and five government departments in NSW and Queensland. The aim of the program was to build the capabilities of primary schools and community services working within a collective impact framework to bridge the gap between science and service in their everyday practices, with a view to achieving substantial, measurable improvements in the wellbeing of children aged 5-12 years.

This submission builds on learnings from my applied research over the past 25 years. I have attached copies of key papers which support my main argument. **Some of these attachments are copyrighted by the publishers and can only be released publicly with their permission.**

Question 1: What factors contribute to children’s and young people’s involvement in youth justice systems in Australia?

The short answer is social inequality, poverty, and racist practices.

These societal injustices manifest in a wide variety of ‘risk factors’ for youth crime including childhood antisocial behaviour, low self-control (impulsiveness, hyperactivity, a poor ability to plan ahead, etc.), low levels of parental supervision, harsh and inconsistent discipline, child maltreatment (abuse and neglect), offending by parents and siblings, parental conflict, a large family size, and weak parental and school attachment.

The high incarceration rates of First Nations children are a direct outcome of these risk factors, compounded by what I have called ‘meta-risk factors’ arising from unique aspects of Aboriginal history, culture, and social structure. These meta factors include forced removals, dependence, institutionalised racism, cultural features, and substance use, moderated by equally interrelated protective factors: cultural resilience, personal controls, and family control measures (Homel et al., 1999).

I have reproduced on the next page a diagram from a recent authoritative paper by Sutton (2022) on adverse childhood experiences and risk factors for youth crime.

The direct implication of this immense body of knowledge about risk and protective factors is that preventive and early intervention initiatives need to be:

1. Tailored to specific life phases;
2. Focussed on life transitions (such as the transition from primary to high school);
3. Be fully ecological, encompassing interventions at the individual child level, parents and family, and community and school.

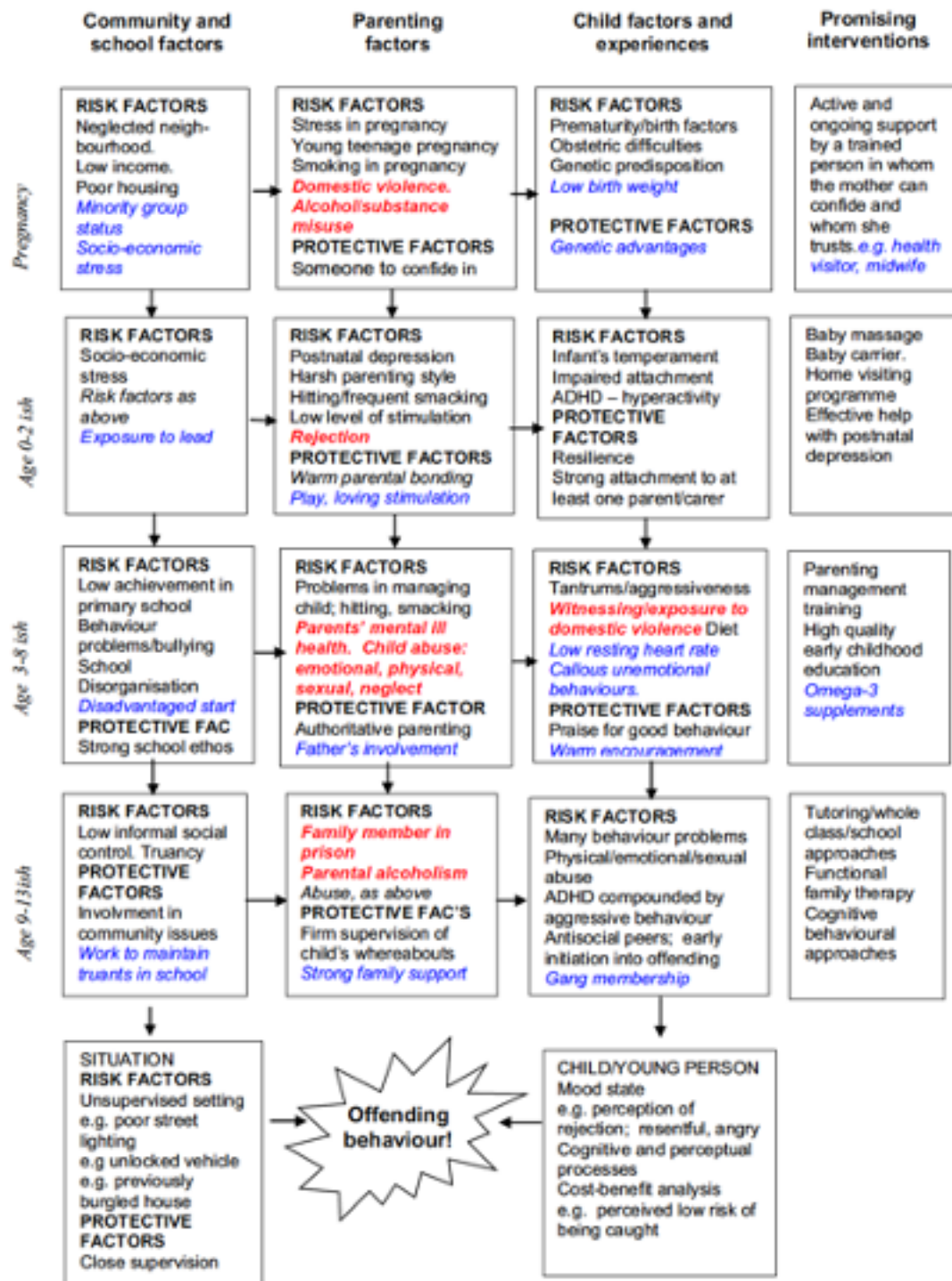
Question 3. Can you identify reforms that show evidence of positive outcomes, including reductions in children’s and young people’s involvement in youth justice and child protection systems, either in Australia or internationally?

I have written extensively about these questions. A key reference is **Attachment 1**: Homel, R. & Thomsen, L. (2017). Developmental crime prevention. In Nick Tilley & Aiden Sidebottom (Eds.). *Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety (2nd edition)* (pp.57-86). UK: Routledge.

This extensive review of the theoretical and evidentiary issues shows that early prevention of youth crime (understood as developmental prevention initiatives implemented before and immediately after birth and at early ages up to the end of primary school) can be very cost-effective in stopping antisocial behaviour and crime before they start, or before they become entrenched.

Some of the most effective preventative approaches are focussed on disadvantaged communities or subgroups of the population where adverse childhood events and risk factors are most highly concentrated. An example is **The Pathways to Prevention Project**.

Carole Sutton (2022). Adverse childhood experiences are important but not the only risk to child development: Revisiting a full risk/resilience matrix. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 32, 67-74



Pathways to Prevention operated in a highly disadvantaged area of Brisbane between 2002 and 2011 as a research-practice partnership involving families, seven local primary schools, and national community agency Mission Australia (Homel et al., 2006). It delivered a suite of programs activities that were available to all families and were often situated in schools and involved teachers. Pathways was specifically designed to address the gap in knowledge about how to make commonly used 'business as usual' family support and child services more effective in the short and long term, and more generally how to make the developmental system more responsive to the needs of disadvantaged children.

In its first two years of operation (2002 and 2003) the seven preschools attached to each of the primary schools were the site for a range of enriched preschool resources. The most important of these was a Communications Program delivered by specialist teachers to the 4-year-old children in two schools (family support services were also available to all these families through the community-based Mission Australia team).

The Communication Program was designed to improve the basic language and communication skills that children need to function effectively both in classroom learning environments and in social interactions. The program began by measuring children's level of language proficiency at the start of the preschool year. The specialist teachers then used each child's individual language profile as a guide to instruction. They developed a teaching sequence in which they gradually introduced each child to increasingly more complex vocabulary and syntax and to more abstract language concepts. In this structured interactive work the specialist teachers carefully scaffolded children's language development from one level of complexity to the next.

The Communication Program was conducted over three school terms over about 30 weeks (plus the language assessment period at the beginning of Term 1). It involved the specialist teacher working for 30-40 minutes per week with each individual child. The specialist teachers also worked with the classroom teachers, helping them understand the language profiles of each child so that they could reinforce the specialised inputs. They designed cue-card prompts for teachers reminding them how to ask questions that would stimulate children's use of certain levels of abstraction in classroom interactions, and regularly prepared topical materials in support of particular themes that the preschool teacher happened to be using.

The most important early outcome of the Communication Program was improved teacher-assessed classroom behaviour at the end of the preschool year. This improved behaviour persisted throughout primary school, in comparison with the children who did not receive the program as preschoolers (Homel et al., 2015).

Importantly, in as yet unpublished analyses we have been able to track (anonymously) all the 600+ children who were preschoolers in 2002 and 2003 to check whether they became involved in the youth justice system up the age of 17. The results show a marked reduction in the rate of youth crime involvement amongst those children who received the Communication Program (with the best estimate of the effect size from the modelling still to be determined). If the children's families also received support during preschool, the rate of youth justice involvement was extremely low – close to zero.

The only other model (apart from Pathways to Prevention) for youth crime prevention at the whole of community level that has **very strong evidence for sustained impact at scale** in Australia and internationally is **Communities That Care (CTC)** (Fagan et al., 2019): <https://www.communitiesthatcare.org.au>.

I have included as **Attachment 2** the overview of this outstandingly successful public health model downloaded from the Australian web site, which includes the evidence collected by Professor John Toumbourou and his colleagues of its impact over a 10-year period on youth crime in a range of local government areas in southern Australian states. The key elements of Communities That Care are set out in the Text Table below.

<p style="text-align: center;">Communities That Care</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Key Elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobilisation of community residents, human service professionals, and local leaders into community coalitions, which are supported and sustained at the local level• Technical assistance and support are provided from a central organisation• Planning is based on epidemiological data on adolescent risk and protective factors collected from an adolescent survey• Coalitions can choose from a selection of evidence-based interventions• Interventions are delivered by organisations under the auspices of the coalition• Has been implemented in a range of countries including Australia <p style="text-align: center;">Cycle of 5 stages</p> <p>Getting Started - Assessing community readiness and identifying key stakeholders</p> <p>Getting Organised - Training key leaders, building and training the coalition</p> <p>Developing a Profile - From community-level risk and protective factors reported by young people</p> <p>Creating a Plan - Targeting priority risk and protective factors with tested interventions</p> <p>Implementing and Evaluating - Train implementers, sustain collaborations, evaluate, reflect on outcomes and processes, and get ready to go round the cycle again.</p>
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However, as we argue in **Attachment 3: Building capacity for sustainable, scalable, place-based youth crime prevention** (Homel et al., in press), for reasons that are unfathomable *Australian policy makers at the Commonwealth and state levels have refused to adopt CTC or adapt it for implementation in existing place-based programs.*

This failure to value and utilise the only evidence-based place-based model for youth crime prevention at a whole of population level is a major policy failure. This failure motivated us to develop *the CREATE Project*, the purpose of which was to build both the human and electronic infrastructure so that community services funded through Communities for Children, a program that has operated since 2005 in 52 disadvantaged communities across Australia, would have the capability to more effectively measure children's needs and address them effectively. Putting this another way, the goal of CREATE was to adapt CTC methods and resources to the Communities for Children environment to maximise their chances of success in improving child wellbeing (the stated aim of Communities for Children).

These resources remain largely unused since the end of the CREATE Project in 2020, with the exception of *Rumble's Quest*, a highly innovative method of validly and reliably measuring the social and emotional wellbeing of children aged 6-12 years based on an interactive computer game (Freiberg et al, 2023; Allen et al., 2023): www.realwell.org.au . Rumble's Quest measures the core outcome of Communities for Children (child wellbeing) and is a key tool for adapting the CTC methodology to the primary school age range by facilitating the measurement of children's needs across local communities through schools as a basis for planning actions fitted to local needs.

Question 4: From your perspective, are there benefits in taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia? If so, what are the next steps?

The success of CTC at the population (or whole community) level, combined with the success of Pathways to Prevention with 'at risk' populations point the way to a policy platform based on *proportionate universalism*. CTC and evidence-based school-wide programs designed to improve social-emotional learning (such as PATHS: Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies: Greenberg et al., 2005) provide benefits to all children and young people, while interventions such as the Pathways Communication Program targeted to children in disadvantaged areas provide additional benefits beyond the normal preschool curriculum.

An excellent model for proportionate universalism, beyond CTC and Pathways, is the *Fast Track Program for Children at Risk* (Conduct Problems Research Group, 2019). Fast Track in its original form in the 1990s in the United States operated for 10 years in four communities in different states. It had a specific focus on children with conduct problems, who received a rich array of supports and programs based on the best evidence involving the children directly, their families, and schools (not dissimilar to the Pathways to Prevention approach, but with vastly greater resources). *Long term evaluation showed reductions in violent and drug-related crime of the order of 30-35% by age 25.*

A blueprint for a national approach to youth crime prevention, drawing on the unique success of the Communities That Care model across dozens of countries including Australia, can be found in the chapter in **Attachment 3** (note that this is in press and subject to copyright, so cannot be disseminated without the permission of the publishers).

The chapter builds in turn on the 1999 report (*Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*), which *I would strongly recommend be read and carefully digested by your project staff*. Although dated in some respects, the core material and recommendations still constitute a sure foundation for a national policy framework for youth crime prevention.

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