

# **EARLY INTERVENTION — CRIME PREVENTION**

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This is not an original research paper. Nor is it a policy paper. It is a brief overview of the concept of developmental crime prevention which summarises the key findings and recommendations of the *Pathways to Prevention* research undertaken for National Crime Prevention by a consortium of eminent academics. It discusses the implications of the report for future service provision and policy direction in both the government and non-government sectors.

## **National Crime Prevention**

National Crime Prevention (formerly known as the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime) is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government. National Crime Prevention aims to find and promote ways of preventing violence, crime and fear of crime in Australian communities. This approach involves partnerships with a range of stakeholders whose activities may impact on crime, including Commonwealth agencies, State and Territory governments, local governments, non-government organisations, academic institutions, community groups and the business sector.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments cooperate through National Crime Prevention and the National Anti-Crime Strategy. This recognises the primary role of the States and Territories for law enforcement, crime prevention and community safety, and the key role of the Commonwealth in research, evaluation, training and social policy issues.

National Crime Prevention (NCP) is involved in a broad range of activities including research and pilot projects, communications, coordination, and education and training. Evaluation, best practice, and training competencies within crime prevention are current priorities. Specific projects focus on property crime and interpersonal violence. Primary prevention including developmental prevention with young people is a central component to NCP's approach.

## **The Promise of Developmental Crime Prevention**

Many crime prevention strategies are aimed at reducing opportunities to offend or to prevent crimes re-occurring in particular locations or situations. The impact of improved security or surveillance may be assessed over a relatively short timeframe. In contrast, developmental crime prevention focuses on a range of social and individual factors that impinge on children's development, thereby encompassing a broad array of programs and interventions. Causal connections and the effects of these programs have been hard to gauge. However, there is a growing body of literature, which demonstrates a strong correlation between certain kinds of negative early childhood experiences and later offending by these children. For instance several Australian studies have indicated a link between child maltreatment, neglect and the experience of family violence with future offending. (Salmelainen 1996, Weatherburn and Lind 1997)

Most importantly, scientifically persuasive evidence has emerged over recent years indicating that interventions early in life can have long-term impacts on crime and other social problems. A review of overseas research found considerable evidence that early intervention with families and the social development of children had positive effects in terms of reducing the likelihood of offending later in life (Tremblay and Craig 1995). This research suggested that family support and parenting programs targeted particularly in early childhood had immediate effects as well as having beneficial outcomes later in life.

The crucial implication of this research for policy and practice is that social development of children has a profound role over the long term in preventing crime. As a result many of the programs that fall within the classification of a developmental approach to crime prevention are those that are primarily designed to enhance the well-being of families and children.

A comparative analysis of the cost-effectiveness of four different approaches to intervening early with children and disadvantaged youth was premised on the distinction that early childhood interventions should be targeted at families at risk, whilst programs for older children should be based on their behaviour (Greenwood et al 1996). Based on the results of mostly Canadian and American research Farrington (1996) lists the following as the most promising approaches to preventing youth crime:

- Frequent home visiting to provide advice about prenatal and postnatal care of children
- pre-school ‘intellectual enrichment’ programs
- cognitive and social skills training for children
- peer influence strategies
- classroom management and other training for teachers
- anti-bullying programs in schools

It is important to note that many of these programs and strategies reduce the likelihood of children becoming victimised within family, school and neighbourhood contexts. Thus the positive effects of effective interventions and supportive environments are two fold - reducing the victimisation of children and over time preventing future offending by these children.

### **The Pathways to Prevention Research**

Most early intervention research has been undertaken overseas. A key question was whether it applied to the Australian context. In addition, until this report was released little was known about the extent of Australian early intervention programs, their impact, and whether they had crime prevention as a specific objective.

This is why the Commonwealth Government’s National Crime Prevention unit and the National Anti-Crime Strategy jointly commissioned this report. The research was carried out by the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium, an interdisciplinary team of eminent academics headed by Professor Ross Homel from Griffith University in Brisbane.

The study consisted of an international literature review, identification and collection of detailed information on a sample of 46 early intervention programs in Australia, and analysis of such programs. The paper recommends a policy framework for the improvement and evaluation of existing services and for the development of new initiatives.

### **Key Findings**

This research project brought together the findings from international as well as Australian literature, and considered those findings together with the information obtained from the sampled Australian programs. The key findings of this research are summarised below.

### *Risk and Protective factors*

The likelihood of an individual becoming involved in criminal activity and or substance abuse is influenced by the existence of *risk and protective factors*. These factors can be associated with the child, the family, school, the community or cultural environment and with life events.

Risk factors include among others, prematurity, prenatal brain damage, poor problem solving ability, lack of empathy, family violence and disharmony, long term parental unemployment, neglect, poor supervision and monitoring of children, deviant peer group, peer rejection, death of a family member, poverty and social or cultural discrimination.

Protective factors include social skills, attachment to family, easy temperament, supportive parents, responsibility for chores, sense of belonging, a positive school environment, opportunities at major transition points, access to support services and attachment to the community.

These factors are interconnected, tend to occur together and operate cumulatively. More needs to be known about how these risk and protective factors operate, in what combination and to what degree in order to produce positive or negative outcomes.

### *Abuse and Neglect*

Child abuse and neglect are of particular importance in relation to future offending. Areas with higher levels of abuse and neglect generally have higher rates of juvenile offending. These areas also have higher levels of social disadvantage, poverty, unemployment and poor parenting practices. The report highlights the need to focus greater attention on neglect.

### *Transition Points*

Each of us takes a path through life that follows a similar route – birth, the preschool years, the transition from primary to high school and the transition from high school to higher education or the workforce. Early in life interventions such as around birth or in the preschool years are identified as being particularly important, but so too are interventions at other crucial transition points in life. The problems associated with these critical periods are often neglected.

### *Existing Programs*

There are over 10,000 early intervention programs operating in Australia. They include child-care and pre-school programs, home-visiting, parenting, education and health related programs. There is considerable diversity and fragmentation across the field.

Very few of the programs and services explicitly have crime prevention as an objective and they rarely recognise the potential of the program to prevent crime. Better health, improved education and better employment opportunities have been their primary focus. Interventions, such as home visiting, family support and parenting education, can have a major impact on vulnerable families and children to improve quality of life and prevent future offending and victimisation.

### *Areas for Improvement*

As mentioned above, the programs are diverse and fragmented. Coordination of programs and service delivery needs considerable improvement in order to target risk factors, address gaps in and improve service provision.

More attention needs to be paid to evaluation. Many of the older established programs have not been evaluated, whereas the newer programs are beginning to have evaluation built in. There is a need for long term evaluation of cross-sectoral early intervention approaches.

Factors which are not adequately addressed by existing programs are key prenatal and perinatal (during birth) risk factors such as prematurity, low birth weight, prenatal brain damage and birth injury. Parental risk factors needing more attention include substance abuse, psychiatric disorders and lack of warmth and affection. There was also some suggestion from early childhood workers that levels post-natal depression are as high as 15% and that universal program of support and care is needed.

Programs also have difficulty providing for the special needs of some children including those who have disabilities, those from single parent families, those from Indigenous families and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Concern was also raised about the siblings of children with disabilities or behavioural disorders. These children can become withdrawn as much of the family's attention is diverted to the child with the problem.

There is a need to target the transition from primary to secondary school as this can be a particularly difficult time for children. This should ideally include 'booster' or reinforcing interventions to support the transition program.

### **Policy Framework/Recommendations**

The *Pathways to Prevention* report proposes a policy framework for assessing the effectiveness of existing early intervention/prevention programs or for planning new programs. The framework is structured as a series of sixteen recommendations which cover three basic sets of principles:

1. Identification of guiding principles that should underpin any developmental prevention program;
2. Principles for appraising existing services and for enhancing their crime prevention effects; and
3. Principles for assisting in the development, implementation, management and evaluation of new kinds of interventions.

The recommendations are discussed in detail in the full *Pathways to Prevention* report and are described to a lesser degree in the *Summary Volume* (both of which can be obtained by contacting National Crime Prevention on 02 6250 6711).

Briefly, the recommendations are as follows:

#### *General Issues*

1. Consider the reasons for aiming at crime prevention.
2. Ask: What is the general view of crime? How are the offences distinguished from one another?
3. Set the overall plan as an area-sensitive mix of preventive justice, situational, community and developmental approaches.
4. Strengthen the support given to developmental approaches, approaches that break the pathways leading to crime, and note the rationale.
5. Prevention aims to alter both risk and protective factors. Ask: How are these and their links to outcomes specified?

### *When to Intervene*

6. Choosing a point in a pathway: establish guidelines for when to act, with a preference for early in the pathway.

### *Target setting*

7. Setting a target: aim at changing several forms of crime.
8. Setting a target: aim at changing several risk and protective factors rather than an isolated few, but with a bias towards some.

### *Who should be targeted? Who should implement?*

9. Selecting people: anticipate variations by gender and ethnicity, and plan for these.
10. Selecting people: establish guidelines for deciding who should be the focus of preventive steps.
11. Selecting people: establish guidelines for choosing who will implement any preventive steps.

### *How to proceed*

12. Moving towards 'how' to proceed: anticipate some 'old myths', some barriers to taking effective action.
13. How? Establish guidelines for implementation: general principles and specific components for any program or service.
14. Make existing programs more effective for prevention.
15. Evaluation: set it as a priority and establish guidelines for how and when it should proceed, with attention to changes in behaviours, cost effectiveness, mechanisms and contexts.
16. Move towards designing a local community based demonstration project.

## **Implications**

This research has a number of potential implications for Australia in terms of future service provision and policy direction in both the government and non-government sectors. Some of these are touched on below.

One of the byproducts of the diverse and fragmented nature of the field is a lack of cross-fertilisation of ideas, knowledge and good practice and as a result there are some gaps in service provision which need to be filled. Evidently there is a need for greater coordination across sectors at all levels, within and between Commonwealth, State, Territory, and local government agencies and non-government organisations. This includes improved communication, information-sharing and cooperation in policy formulation and service provision.

On the surface this would seem to be a relatively straight forward task and some local areas have managed to accomplish some level of coordination, (eg. as part of the *Interagency Schools As Community Centres Pilot Project* outlined in the *Pathways to Prevention* report, Appendices volume, p.87), but it has historically proved to be very difficult to achieve on a larger scale. This may be due in part to the different funding arrangements and responsibilities of the various sectors and levels of government as well as their commitment to different goals and objectives.

Childcare centres and preschools have been singled out by the researchers as ideal locations for early intervention programs and services because they are readily and regularly accessed by parents. If this proposal was to be seriously contemplated, the implications for organising and funding service delivery would be considerable.

The research points to the lack of reliable or continuous funding for some promising programs. It suggests that many of these programs and interventions are not valued highly enough. This presents a major challenge to service providers, funding bodies and policy makers across the government and non-government sector.

### **Responses to the *Pathways* Report**

We have found the response to the report overwhelmingly positive. So far, over 10,000 copies of the summary volume and 3,000 copies of the full report have been distributed. We have had positive feedback from State and Territory ministers, policy makers, researchers and practitioners in a diverse number of fields. Many have said they are undertaking work, which is in keeping with the spirit of the report, and they had found the report to be an affirmation of current initiatives and approaches and an encouragement to pursue certain courses of action.

Examples of recent State and Territory investment in early intervention work include the *Families First* home-visiting program in NSW (\$50 million over four years), large scale research with adolescents that will inform the development of a *Communities that Care* project in Victoria, and the \$5 million allocated to early intervention as part of Queensland's new crime prevention initiative.

Similarly at a Commonwealth level there is growing interest in co-ordinating government activity in the early intervention field. The Commonwealth Government announced in the recent budget, a new \$8 million Youth Crime and Families Program. Existing initiatives include a range of early childhood and family services, and programs for youth. Examples include the *Good Beginnings* home visiting pilot projects for families with young children and a range of initiatives aimed at adolescents such as those relating to mental health and suicide, drug use, and homelessness. There are signs that over the forthcoming year there will be consolidation of this activity into an enhanced cross-departmental approach to provide support to families, and vulnerable and at risk youth.

We would not claim that the *Pathways* report has precipitated all of this interest and activity in early intervention, but it is informing many of these developments. We are conscious of and encouraged by the fact that the new NCP *Youth Crime and Families Program* will have to be well designed and focused in order to complement the burgeoning number of Commonwealth, State and non-government initiatives and programs that have an early intervention component and incorporate a developmental crime prevention perspective.

## References

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