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Abstract | Many young people desist from offending by the time they reach adulthood. However, a small percentage will have continued involvement in the adult system. In Australia, little is known about the factors associated with youth to adult offending. This study aimed to determine the proportion of young people who transitioned from youth custody to the adult criminal justice system in the state of Victoria and what factors were associated with this. Findings indicated that most young people who served a period in youth custody continued into the adult criminal justice system; however, only a small number of factors were associated with this transition.

Factors associated with adult justice system involvement among incarcerated youth: A prospective study

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Introduction

Rates of recorded crime committed by young people have declined sharply in many Western jurisdictions, including Australia, over the past few decades (Griffiths & Norris 2020; Payne, Brown & Broadhurst 2018; Weatherburn & Rahman 2021). This decline likely reflects the interplay of various risk factors and sociopolitical, technological and economic considerations, including the use of diversionary schemes to reduce the number of young people, particularly those with minor offences, entering the justice system (Griffiths & Norris 2020; Payne, Brown & Broadhurst 2018; Weatherburn, Freeman & Holmes 2014; Weatherburn & Rahman 2021; Wilson & Hoge 2013). Consequently, youth justice (especially custodial) populations increasingly consist of people who have had repeated contact with the justice system, who accumulate convictions for more severe offences and who have complex health and welfare needs that require higher levels of intervention (Cohen, Piquero & Jennings 2010; Farrington 2003; Laub & Sampson 2001; Moffitt 2018, 2003).



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Risk factors for the onset and persistence of offending among young people

Given the substantial costs associated with youth offending, extensive research has focused on understanding the factors involved in the development of such behaviour (eg Bonta & Andrews 2023; Borum 2000). Unsurprisingly, non-explanatory risk factors—those factors measuring the same (or similar) construct as antisocial behaviour (eg a history of aggressive or delinquent behaviour)—are associated with offending (Bonta & Andrews 2023). However, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of longitudinal studies have consistently reported small effect sizes for most potential explanatory risk factors—that is, factors that measure constructs that are distinct from antisocial behaviour (eg low cognitive function, impulsivity, adverse child-rearing practices and poverty; see Farrington 2015).

Early developmental theorists (eg Moffitt 1993) proposed that neuropsychological impairment is a critical risk factor for child-onset offending, and it has been thought to distinguish young people whose offending persists across the lifespan from those whose behaviour desists during late adolescence or early adulthood. More recently, studies have found that cognitive and biological deficits and personality pathology are common to young people who engage in antisocial behaviour, regardless of when such behaviour first emerges. Moreover, they have found that antisocial behaviour that emerges during adolescence—previously thought to be underpinned by social factors and likely to ‘burn out’—has a poor prognosis, frequently persisting into adulthood (Fairchild et al. 2013). Consequently, it appears that the quality of one’s early environment moderates the relationship between one’s individual vulnerabilities and age of onset of antisocial behaviour. Consistent with this proposition is the finding that family-related factors and adverse childhood experiences are among the strongest predictors of the *onset* of offending. Such factors, however, play a more limited role in the *persistence* of offending, which is better explained by the accumulation of various risk factors, including specific clinical needs (including alcohol/substance use problems), education and employment difficulties, associations with antisocial peers and family problems (Basto-Pereira & Farrington 2022; Joliffe et al. 2017).

Males and people from some ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented among youth justice populations (Armytage & Ogloff 2017; Broidy et al. 2015; Chen et al. 2005; Livingston et al. 2008; Lynch, Buckman & Krenske 2003; Moffitt & Caspi 2001; Odgers et al. 2008, 2007; Rhoades et al. 2016; Victorian Government 2020). However, relatively few studies have examined the impact of gender and ethnicity on the persistence of offending. The few prospective studies that have been conducted to date indicate that the strongest predictors of persistence are equally important for males and females (Scott & Brown 2018). Similarly, studies of youth involved at similar stages of the justice system typically report small or non-significant associations between ethnicity and justice system involvement (Zane & Pupo 2021), suggesting that any observed differences in rates of justice system involvement in the general population may reflect differences in the prevalence of common risk factors (Shepherd, Singh & Fullam 2015; Shepherd et al. 2014). Reasons for the higher prevalence of risk factors in ethnic minority populations have also been explored. Ongoing impacts of colonisation and social disadvantage have been identified as relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Post-migratory challenges, including difficulties with acculturation, social exclusion, barriers to accessing services and family disconnection have been noted for culturally diverse populations (Shepherd 2016; Shepherd, Singh & Fullam 2015).

Current study

Rationale

Understanding the factors that underlie young people's persistent offending behaviour is essential to devising effective interventions. Numerous factors that may increase one's risk of persistent offending have been proposed. However, the significant methodological limitations of much of this work (eg the use of retrospective, cross-sectional or uncontrolled study designs) precludes firm conclusions from being drawn. Few prospective studies have examined the long-term criminal justice outcomes of young people in Australia. Studies of incarcerated young people are particularly rare. This gap in knowledge requires addressing, not only because of the significant costs associated with justice involvement but also because young people who have had justice system contact are more likely to experience numerous adverse life outcomes (Armytage & Ogloff 2017; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023; Victorian Government 2020).

Aims

This study was designed to address the gap in the regional literature and the methodological limitations of previous studies by examining the long-term (10-year) offending outcomes of young people incarcerated in youth justice facilities in Victoria. We aimed to:

- determine the proportion of incarcerated youth who progress to the adult justice system over a 10-year period; and
- identify which demographic, clinical and criminal history variables are associated with a person's transition from the youth to the adult criminal justice system.

Method

Original study

The current study is an extension of previous work conducted by researchers at the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science. The original project was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant and examined both the nature of youth crime in Victoria and the utility of structured violence risk assessment tools in Victorian youth custodial settings.

The original project's method has been described in detail elsewhere (Shepherd et al. 2014). Briefly, young people who were detained in the Parkville Youth Justice Precinct or Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre between July 2011 and June 2012, spoke English and had the capacity to provide consent were approached to participate in the study. Two hundred and fifteen people (177 males; 82.3%) aged 12–21 years ($M=16.8$ years, $SD=1.8$ years) participated voluntarily in the original study (recruitment fraction=0.96). The sample comprised approximately 30 percent of the 751 young people detained in Victoria's youth justice centres in that fiscal year. Two researchers (CH and SS) conducted baseline semi-structured interviews with each participant. Questions covered demographic information and key domains measured by contemporary offending risk/need assessment tools. Participants also completed a battery of psychometric and cognitive assessments.

Current study

Case linkage

The current study employed a prospective cohort design. The original cohort's lifetime health, human services and justice data through to February 2022 were extracted from 13 statewide databases that record contact with police, youth justice and adult criminal justice systems, and health and social welfare services, and deaths. These data were linked to those collected during the original study. Of the 215 people interviewed for the original study, 197 (91.6%) could be matched to one or more of the administrative databases used in the current study. Those people who could not be identified were excluded from all analyses in the present study.

Data coding and measurement

Ethnicity

Participants' country of birth, languages spoken and cultural heritage were determined at baseline interview and validated using the lifetime administrative records extracted from statewide databases. People are typically considered to be culturally and linguistically diverse if their primary language, cultural norms and values differ from those of the mainstream community in which they reside (Sawrikar & Katz 2009). Here, we have used this term to represent a group that excludes white/Caucasian populations with largely European ancestry and Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples. As such, it largely comprises people of African, Asian, Pasifika, Latin American, Caribbean or Middle Eastern backgrounds.

Child maltreatment

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink 1998) was administered at baseline interview to assess participants' self-reported experiences of abuse and neglect during childhood and adolescence. Its 28 items measure the experience of three forms of abuse (physical, sexual and emotional) and two forms of neglect (physical and emotional). A three-item scale is used to detect false negative reports. Respondents rate the extent to which they experienced each item on a five-point scale. Higher scores indicate more frequent maltreatment; defined thresholds are used to classify cases according to their severity (ie *none*, *low*, *moderate* or *severe*). Participants' exposure to caregiver criminality and violence in the home was determined by asking them directly about these experiences.

Health and social welfare

The administrative service records were coded for the presence of any contact with public mental health (including alcohol and drug) and social welfare (child protection and homelessness) services before their initial contact with the adult criminal justice system (or, for those who did not have contact with the adult criminal justice system, the end of the study period). The records of those who had contact with Victoria's public mental health services were coded for the presence of mental disorder and admissions to inpatient (acute, sub-acute and secure extended care) units in general psychiatric and forensic settings.

Offending and victimisation

The administrative police records were coded for the presence of any offending or victimisation that occurred before a person's initial contact with the adult criminal justice system (or the end of the study period). To avoid artificially inflating the frequency of offending and victimisation, we calculated the number of unique incidents instead of the number of charges relating to these incidents. Consistent with Victorian legislation and international standards for analysing crime data, offending and victimisation (as reported by Victoria Police) were classified using the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2015) and Victoria's Crime Statistics Agency's (CSA) offence classification (Crime Statistics Agency 2015). The ICCS is a hierarchical system that classifies similar offences into one of 11 broad categories. The CSA offence classification is based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011), which is conceptually like the ICCS. Offences are classified into one of five divisions that encompass those categories identified by the ICCS. Offences involving threatened or actual harm (eg fatal and non-fatal assault, contact sex offences, abduction and robbery) and others defined under the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic), such as aggravated burglary, were considered violent. All others were considered non-violent. Inchoate offences were coded as though they had been completed. Incidents that incorporated multiple offence categories were coded under their respective categories.

Psychopathy and offending risk assessment

Psychopathic traits were assessed at baseline using the Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version (PCL:YV; Forth, Kosson & Hare 2003). The PCL:YV consists of 20 items that measure the interpersonal (eg impression management, grandiosity, manipulation), affective (eg lack of remorse, shallow affect, callous/lacking empathy), lifestyle (eg stimulation seeking, parasitic orientation, impulsivity) and antisocial (eg poor anger control, early behaviour problems, serious criminal behaviour) elements related to the traditional concept of psychopathy. Each item is rated on a three-point ordinal scale (*item does not apply* (0), *item applies to some extent* (1), or *item applies* (2)), based on information gathered during interview and file review. There are no agreed cut-scores for characterising someone as 'psychopathic'; rather, the construct is measured dimensionally, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of psychopathy.

Participants' risk of violent recidivism was assessed at baseline using the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY; Borum, Bartel & Forth 2003). The SAVRY was developed to assist in the assessment and management of risk of violence among adolescents aged 12–18. Evaluators determine the relevance (*low, moderate or high*) of 24 historical, social/contextual and individual risk factors and the presence of six protective factors and form a judgement of the person's level of risk (*low, moderate or high*). Although the risk rating is based on a cumulative assessment of a person's risk of violence, it is not linked directly to a particular score or range of scores. Nevertheless, for research purposes, each item tends to be scored numerically (risk factors=0–2, protective factors=0–1) and the scores summed, with higher total scores correlating positively with a person's level of risk.

Contact with the adult criminal justice system

Adult criminal justice system contact was defined as contact with Corrections Victoria over the follow-up period, including both adult custodial (prison) and community corrections systems. The administrative records were coded for any instances where participants were remanded to prison or sentenced to a custodial or community-based restitution or supervision order. Community-based orders included both supervision orders (Commonwealth orders, community-based orders, community corrections orders, drug treatment orders, and intensive corrections orders) and repatriation only orders (community based/corrections orders (community work), community work permits, fine conversion orders, and fine default orders).

Statistical analyses

All analyses were conducted using R version 4.3.1 (R Core Team 2023). Two participants had missing data on the SAVRY and PCL:YV. Therefore, we analysed complete cases. For all standard analyses, two-tailed tests were used with a significance level of $\alpha < 0.05$. We corrected for multiple comparisons using a false discovery rate (FDR) of 5 percent (Benjamini & Hochberg 1995); *q*-values were calculated using the *qvalue* package (Storey et al. 2021).

Descriptive analyses

Numeric variables were expressed as an arithmetic mean (and standard deviation) or median (and median absolute deviation). Categorical variables were expressed as counts and percentages.

Correlates of contact with the adult justice system

Time-to-event analyses using Cox proportional hazards regression were performed to identify factors associated with adult criminal justice system involvement. Time at risk was calculated from the age of 10 years to first contact with the adult justice system, death or the end of the study period (February 2022). Univariate analyses were conducted to examine the association between adult justice system involvement and each correlate (ie putative risk or protective factor). A multivariate model was then developed, in which all variables were entered simultaneously, to quantify the unique association between each factor and adult justice system involvement. Plots of the Schoenfeld residuals were examined, and χ^2 tests were used to assess the proportional hazards assumption (Hosmer, Lemeshow & May 2008).

Results

Summary statistics

Participants were aged 14–31 (mean, 27.3 (standard deviation, 2.4)) at the end of the study period. Eight people (4.1%) died between the initial and current studies. Given our use of time-to-event analyses, they were retained in the study. Table 1 shows the distribution of the participants' characteristics.

Table 1: Participant characteristics, by adult criminal justice system involvement		
Domain	Adult CJS involvement	
	Yes (n=134)	No (n=63)
Sociodemographics, n (%)		
Gender		
Male	117 (87.3)	45 (71.4)
Cultural background		
Neither culturally/linguistically diverse nor Indigenous	65 (48.5)	33 (52.4)
Culturally and linguistically diverse	26 (19.4)	17 (27.0)
Indigenous	43 (32.1)	13 (20.6)
Health and social welfare service contact, n (%)		
Child protection	109 (81.3)	43 (68.3)
Out-of-home care	63 (47.0)	22 (34.9)
Homelessness	15 (11.2)	29 (46.0)
Alcohol and other drug	46 (34.3)	21 (33.3)
Mental health	79 (59.0)	36 (57.1)
Admission	25 (18.7)	15 (23.8)
Offending, M (SD)		
Age at first offence	13.2 (2.1)	14.0 (2.1)
Number of incidents	102.5 (64.2)	63.3 (51.6)
Victimisation, M (SD)		
Number of incidents	1.7 (1.9)	3.4 (5.0)
Baseline offending risk assessment, M (SD)		
SAVRY		
Total score	27.9 (9.0)	24.3 (10.0)
Historical	11.1 (4.0)	9.5 (4.0)
Social/contextual	7.1 (2.9)	6.4 (3.0)
Individual/clinical	9.7 (3.8)	8.4 (4.2)
Protective	1.5 (1.8)	2.0 (1.9)
PCL-YV		
Total score	19.5 (6.7)	16.1 (6.6)
Interpersonal	2.0 (1.9)	1.4 (1.7)
Affective	2.6 (2.0)	2.0 (1.8)
Lifestyle	5.4 (2.3)	4.3 (2.5)
Antisocial	7.8 (2.3)	6.6 (2.4)

Note: CJS=criminal justice system; Indigenous=Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; M=mean; SD=standard deviation; SAVRY=Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth; PCL-YV=Psychopathy Checklist-Youth Version. Service contact, offending, and victimisation reflect instances occurring before first contact with the adult criminal justice system (or, for those who did not have contact with the criminal justice system, the end of the study period). Means are expressed as a function of valid cases rather than total cases

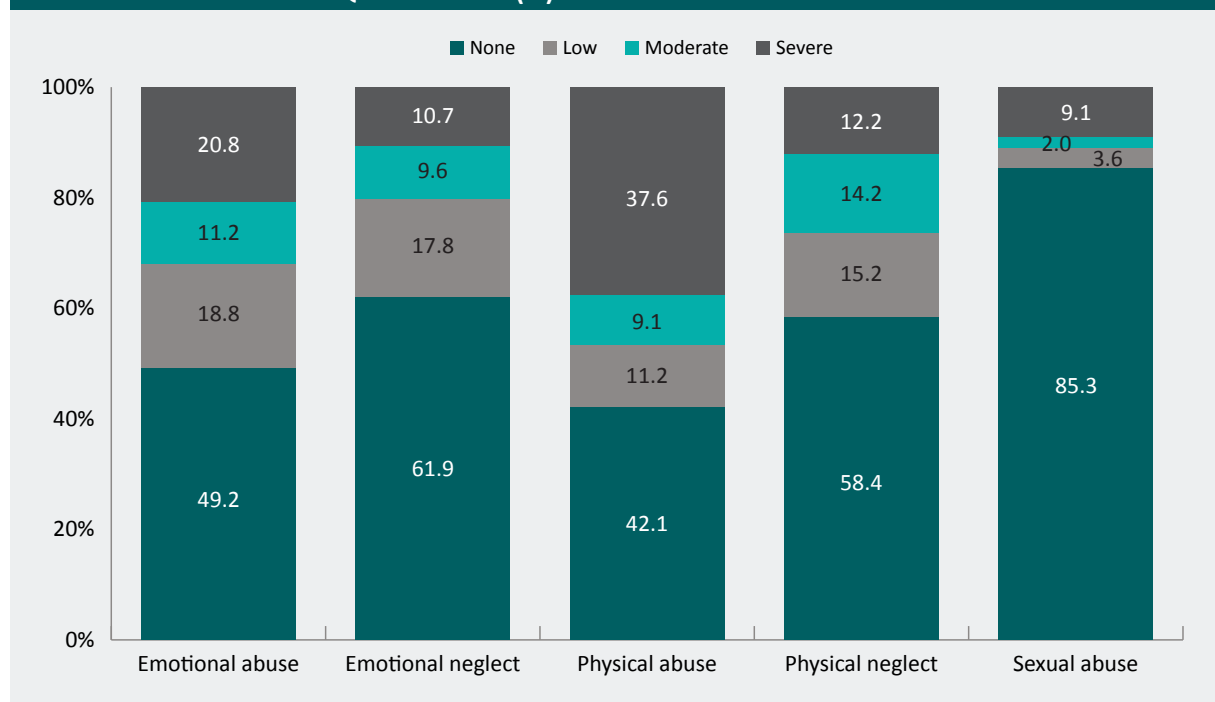
Sociodemographic characteristics

Most participants ($n=162$, 82.2%) were male. Similarly, most ($n=142$, 72.1%) described themselves as being of Australian cultural background; 56 (39.4%) of these participants (28.4% of the sample) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. An additional 12 participants (6.1%) were of European descent. The remaining 43 (21.8%) were of Pasifika ($n=19$, 9.6%), African ($n=12$, 6.1%), Asian ($n=7$, 3.6%) or Middle Eastern ($n=5$, 2.5%) background, comprising the culturally and linguistically diverse cohort. At the time of baseline interview, 163 participants (83.6%) reported a history of poor school achievement, and 119 (61.0%) reported a history of significant difficulties characterised by grade failures, placements in alternative learning settings for students with poor academic performance and withdrawal from education.

Child maltreatment and child protection involvement

At the time of baseline interview, the vast majority of participants ($n=172$, 87.3%) reported having ever been abused, neglected or exposed to a caregiver's criminality or violence in the home (see Figure 1). Most ($n=152$, 77.2%) were the subject of a child protection notification. Harm was substantiated in 123 cases (62.4%); 121 (61.4%) were placed on a protective intervention order; and 85 (43.1%) were removed from the home on at least one occasion.

Figure 1: Proportion of incarcerated young people with a self-reported history of maltreatment on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (%)



Psychiatric morbidity

Most participants ($n=115$, 58.3%) were registered with Victoria's public mental health services before their initial contact with the adult criminal justice system (or, for those who did not have contact with the adult criminal justice system, the end of the study period); 40 (20.3%) were admitted to an inpatient psychiatric unit on at least one occasion. More than half ($n=105$, 53.3%) were diagnosed with a mental disorder. Nearly half ($n=87$, 44.2%) had a documented history of substance abuse; 19 (9.6%) met criteria for a substance dependence syndrome. Twenty-two (11.2%) were diagnosed with a schizophrenia spectrum disorder.

Offending and victimisation

Participants were charged in relation to 7,189 criminal incidents, 2,889 of which (40.2%) were violent in nature, before their first contact with the adult criminal justice system—or, for those who did not have contact with the adult criminal justice system, the end of the study period (range=1–354; median=77 (median absolute deviation=53.4); incidence rate=308 per 100 person-years). Almost one-third of young people ($n=58$, 29.4%) were charged in relation to an incident that occurred before the age of 12; three-quarters ($n=150$, 76.1%) were charged in relation to an incident that occurred before the age of 15 (mean=13.5 (standard deviation=2.1)). Virtually all ($n=192$, 97.5%) were charged in relation to a violent incident (range=0–43; median=10 (median absolute deviation=8.9); incidence rate=98 per 100 person-years). Eight young people (4.1%) were charged in relation to a homicide or attempted homicide (see Table 2).

Table 2: Incidence and prevalence rates of youth offending behaviour

Offence type	Prevalence n (%)	Incidence ^a n (rates per 100 person-years)
Crimes against the person		
Acts leading to death or intending to cause death	8 (4.1%)	9 (0.4)
Acts leading to harm or intending to cause harm	186 (94.4%)	1,583 (67.8)
Injurious acts of a sexual nature	28 (14.2%)	41 (1.8)
Acts against property involving violence or threat against a person	135 (68.5%)	656 (28.1)
Property and deception offences		
Acts against property only	193 (98.0%)	5,516 (236.4)
Acts involving fraud, deception or corruption	155 (78.7%)	585 (25.1)
Drug offences		
Acts involving controlled psychoactive substances or other drugs	123 (62.4%)	256 (11.0)
Public order, security and justice procedures offences		
Acts against public order, authority, and provisions of the state	188 (95.4%)	1,440 (61.7)
Acts against public safety and state security	153 (77.7%)	418 (17.9)
Other offences		
Acts against the natural environment	15 (7.6%)	18 (0.8)
Other criminal acts not elsewhere classified	50 (25.4%)	70 (3.0)

a: Time at risk=852,273 days

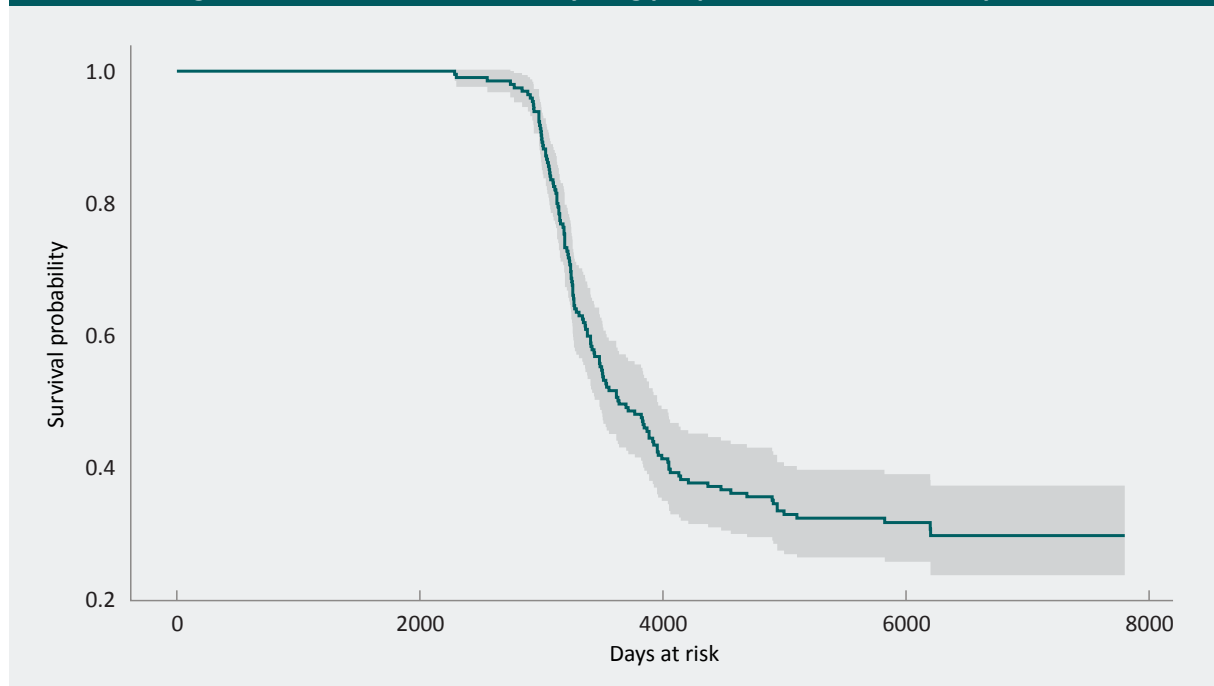
Most participants ($n=140$, 71.1%) had a documented history of criminal victimisation before their initial contact with the adult criminal justice system (incidence rate=10.3 per 100 person-years). Most ($n=120$, 60.9%) had a documented history of violent victimisation, and a significant minority ($n=39$, 19.8%) had a documented history of sexual assault victimisation; fewer than five (<2.5%) were victims of homicide.

Transition to the adult criminal justice system

Prevalence of contact with the adult criminal justice system

Most young people ($n=134$, 68.0%) had contact with Victoria's adult criminal justice system during the follow-up period; 71 (36.0%) had contact with the adult criminal justice system before the age of 19; and 114 (57.9%) had contact before the age of 21 (median survival rate=3,473 days)—see Figure 2. Everyone who had contact with the adult criminal justice system was remanded to prison on at least one occasion. Most of those remanded ($n=116$, 86.6%) were sentenced to a custodial order on at least one occasion. Approximately one-third ($n=59$, 29.9%) were remanded to prison before the age of 19; more than half ($n=105$, 53.3%) were remanded before the age of 21. More than half ($n=105$, 53.3%) were placed on a community-based order with supervision requirements.

Figure 2: Kaplan–Meier curve demonstrating the probability of adult criminal justice system involvement against time for all incarcerated young people involved in the study



Note: The shaded band represents the 95 percent confidence interval

Correlates of contact with the adult criminal justice system

Table 3 presents the univariate and multivariate associations of participants' characteristics and adult criminal justice involvement.

Table 3: Association between participant characteristics and adult criminal justice involvement		
Domain	HR _{unadj} (95% CI)	HR _{adj} (95% CI)
Sociodemographics		
Male gender	1.93 (1.16, 3.21)*	0.99 (0.57, 1.71)
Cultural background		
Neither culturally/linguistically diverse nor Indigenous	—	—
Culturally and linguistically diverse	0.99 (0.63, 1.56)	0.87 (0.53, 1.43)
Indigenous	1.31 (0.89, 1.93)	1.39 (0.89, 2.15)
Health and social welfare service contact		
Child protection	1.34 (0.87, 2.08)	0.89 (0.52, 1.52)
Out-of-home care	1.38 (0.98, 1.94)	
Homelessness	0.23 (0.14, 0.40)***	0.15 (0.08, 0.28)***
Alcohol and other drug	0.87 (0.61, 1.25)	1.39 (0.93, 2.09)
Mental health	1.03 (0.73, 1.45)	1.05 (0.70, 1.58)
Admission	0.90 (0.58, 1.39)	
Offending		
Age at first offence	0.90 (0.83, 0.98)*	0.95 (0.85, 1.06)
Number of incidents	1.01 (>1.00, 1.01)***	>1.00 (>1.00, 1.01)*
Victimisation		
Number of incidents	0.85 (0.78, 0.93)***	0.82 (0.74, 0.91)***
Baseline offending risk assessment		
SAVRY		
Total score	1.03 (1.01, 1.05)**	1.02 (0.99, 1.06)
Historical	1.06 (1.02, 1.11)**	
Social/contextual	1.06 (>1.00, 1.13)*	
Individual/clinical	1.06 (1.02, 1.11)**	
Protective	0.90 (0.81, 0.99)*	
PCL:YV		
Total score	1.05 (1.03, 1.08)***	1.04 (<1.00, 1.08)
Interpersonal	1.12 (1.04, 1.22)**	
Affective	1.12 (1.03, 1.22)**	
Lifestyle	1.12 (1.04, 1.20)**	
Antisocial	1.16 (1.08, 1.26)***	

Note: HR unadj=unadjusted hazard ratio; HR adj= adjusted hazard ratio; CI=confidence interval; Indigenous=Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; SAVRY=Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth; PCL:YV=Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version. Significance testing: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$; p -values were corrected for multiple testing using a false discovery rate of 5 percent, with $q<0.05$ indicated in **bold**

Males, those who were younger at the time of their first recorded offence, those involved in more criminal incidents as a youth and those with higher scores on the SAVRY and PCL:YV were significantly more likely to be involved in the adult criminal justice system. In contrast, those with a history of contact with homelessness services, those who were victimised more frequently, and those with higher scores on the SAVRY Protective Domain were less likely to be involved. Ethnicity and contact with child protection, mental health and alcohol and other drug services were not significant. Most variables that were significant remained so after correcting for multiple comparisons.

Three of the 11 variables entered in a multivariate model remained significantly associated with adult criminal justice system involvement. Whereas those involved in more criminal incidents as a young person were more likely to be involved in the adult criminal justice system, those with a history of contact with homelessness services and those who were victimised more frequently were less likely.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the long-term offending outcomes and associated risk factors of a cohort of young people in custody in Australia. The sample consisted of people in custody in Victoria's youth justice centres in 2011 and 2012.

Prevalence of contact with the adult criminal justice system

More than two-thirds of the sample had contact with the state's adult correctional system (ie Corrections Victoria) during the 10-year follow-up period (2011–12 to 2022); all of those were incarcerated on at least one occasion. The true prevalence rate is likely to be higher; the youngest people in the cohort were aged approximately 21–22 at the end of the study period and therefore had relatively limited time to have contact with the adult system. However, the observed prevalence rate appears to be a reasonable estimate of incarcerated young people's contact with the criminal justice system during the first 10–15 years of adulthood. Indeed, 85 percent of those who had contact with the adult criminal justice system did so by the age of 21 (an age covered during the study period). The observed rates of contact with the adult criminal justice system are higher than those observed in other studies of incarcerated young people. This is probably a feature of Victoria traditionally having relatively low numbers of young people in custody compared with other Australian states and comparable Western jurisdictions. Victoria has traditionally prioritised a welfarist approach to youth justice, opting for diversionary mechanisms and detaining young people as a last resort where possible, meaning that incarcerated youth often present with more complex needs and serious offending.

Correlates of adult criminal justice system involvement

At the univariate level, several factors—male gender, contact with homelessness services, age at first offence, number of offending and victimisation incidents and SAVRY and PCL:YV scores—were associated with adult criminal justice system involvement. However, most of these factors were not significant in multivariate analyses, demonstrating their overlap. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies, which have demonstrated that male gender, ethnic minority status and child protection involvement predict the onset but not persistence of offending among young people (Assink et al. 2015; Braga et al. 2017; Leschied et al. 2008; Scott & Brown 2018; Zane & Pupo 2021).

Although ethnic minority status was not significantly associated with adult criminal justice system involvement, most incarcerated young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally diverse backgrounds (76.7% and 60.5%, respectively) had contact with the adult criminal justice system.

Contact with homelessness services and higher rates of victimisation were associated with a reduced risk of contact with the adult criminal justice system, which is inconsistent with prior research (Jennings, Piquero & Reingle 2012; Mitchell et al. 2023; Smith & Ecob 2007). However, it is possible that those young people *in contact with homelessness services* and those who are *identified* by police as being victimised receive support that, no matter how limited, would otherwise be unavailable, and that this support contributed to reduced criminal justice system involvement.

Strengths and limitations

This is one of the few studies in Australia to have prospectively examined the long-term offending outcomes of young people in custody. Its use of several statewide databases that record contact with police and correctional, health and social welfare services and its extended (10-year) follow-up period enabled an examination of these young people's involvement with the adult criminal justice system and a broad range of factors that might be associated with such contact. Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations.

Although data linkage studies are generally robust, they depend on the type and quality of data available and the accuracy of the linkage itself. Errors in data entry, extraction and matching can impact the validity of a study's findings. For example, 18 justice-involved young people (8.4%) who were interviewed at the time of the initial study could not be matched by the Centre for Victorian Data Linkage to the datasets maintained by Youth Justice at the time of the current study, even though their records were previously available. This could have been due to several reasons, such as errors in the recording of young people's identifying details at the time of the original study or potential Youth Justice record restriction for security or sensitivity reasons. Moreover, the quality of the administrative data was generally poor; most variables had a significant amount of missing data and needed to be excluded. Consequently, the scope of our analyses was limited to broad service contact related information. Similarly, given our use of register data, it was not possible to measure factors that would otherwise be of interest (eg descriptors of one's mental state or self-reported adverse or positive experiences). Additionally, the current study used adult criminal justice system contact as an indicator of persistent offending; it did not specifically measure the duration of one's criminal career. Further, the use of categorical/binary variables (eg child protection contact vs no child protection contact) may have impacted the variation that was able to be measured. Notably, many of the statistically significant variables were count/continuous, suggesting that variables that allow for more variation in measure may be helpful in examining risk factors in a high-risk sample.

Although this sample represented a significant proportion of the population of young people in custody in 2011–12, the relatively small sample size prevented us from examining whether those factors associated with adult criminal justice system involvement differed across gender and ethnicity. Further, this sample consisted of a high-risk cohort of young people in custody in the state of Victoria, and findings may not be generalisable to other cohorts of justice-involved young people.

Implications

Our findings, and those of previous studies, suggest that it may be difficult to prospectively identify those young people who are likely to become involved in the adult criminal justice system because few risk factors are specifically associated with persistent offending among justice-involved youth. Given the considerable overlap in risk factors between those incarcerated young people who persist in their offending and those who do not, it seems prudent to address these factors among young people who offend, regardless of their perceived risk of persistence. Early and intensive social intervention is recommended for young people who start to have frequent contact with the justice system at younger ages. Timely and effective community-informed, culturally responsive intervention is particularly important for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, given their significant health burden and marginalisation.

Future directions

Future research should focus on attaining large and diverse sample sizes, so that our understanding of factors related to offending behaviours in female, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally diverse populations can be improved.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the long-term offending outcomes and associated risk factors for a cohort of young people in custody in Victoria. Most young people transitioned to the adult criminal justice system. Few risk factors were significantly associated with adult criminal justice system involvement in multivariate analyses. Given the considerable overlap in risk factors between those incarcerated young people with and without adult justice system contact, it seems prudent to address these factors among young people with justice system contact, regardless of their perceived risk of persistence.

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