



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHIEF SCIENCE ADVISOR

Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, KNZM FRSNZ FMedSci FRS
Chief Science Advisor

MEDIA RELEASE

11 June 2018

Embargoed until 7am on 12 June 2018

Stopping youth offending – What does the evidence tell us?

How can youth offending, and its potential for further criminal activity, be prevented? A new report from Justice sector Science Advisor, Dr Ian Lambie, and released by the Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, reviews the evidence. It argues for Governments to adopt a "developmental crime prevention" model.

The goal is to stop criminal behaviour before it has a chance to start, by making sure all children in New Zealand have the opportunity to flourish, and the issues they face are addressed early on.

"More than 40 years ago, New Zealand researchers' world-leading longitudinal studies of cohorts in Dunedin and Christchurch clearly demonstrated the pathways that led from challenges in early life to young offending and on to adult prison," Dr Lambie said. "Research since that time has shown that the most effective – and cost-effective - way to reduce prison costs is to prevent kids getting into crime at the earliest opportunity."

The report, entitled 'It is never too early, never too late: A discussion paper on preventing youth offending in New Zealand,' describes the ways young people might get on a pathway to prison, and how to prevent that happening. The prevention message was already clear in reports from 20 years ago – developmental prevention is more effective than prison at reducing youth crime and harm to victims. A whole cohort of young offenders has grown up since those early reports. The evidence shows we need to help the next generation avoid the same outcomes.

Backgrounder follows.

For more information, please contact:

Assoc. Prof Ian Lambie: i.lambie@auckland.ac.nz Tel : 027 280 9948

-ENDS-

Background

The youth-justice system currently undertakes many innovative programmes geared to youth offenders, but we need to be better at preventing young people engaging in criminal behaviour in the first place. By the time young people are involved in the criminal justice system, a lot of damage is already evident, including:

1. High rates of mental illness: Between 50% and 75% of youth involved in the justice system meet diagnostic criteria for at least one mental or substance use disorder (vs. 13% of youth generally). Young people in youth-detention centres are about 10 times more likely to have a psychiatric disorder.
2. Heavy drinking and substance use: Heavy drinking by 79% of young NZ offenders (vs. 27% of non-offenders). Two-thirds (65.5%) of offenders aged 17 to 24 had used methamphetamine in the past year.
3. Learning difficulties: One in five youth offenders has a learning disability; 92% of more serious young offenders (in youth-justice residences) have significant learning difficulties, with reading skills particularly low (mean ability at 4th percentile).
4. Trauma, abuse and family violence: As many as 80% of child and young offenders have experienced family violence; most (87%) offenders aged 14 to 16 in 2016/17 had had prior reports of care-and-protection concerns made to Oranga Tamariki. Early trauma and abuse can have neurophysiological impacts, making children less able to manage their behaviour and emotions, as well as tending to act more aggressively.
5. Severely challenging behaviour: As many as 16% of pre-schoolers and young children present with severe 'conduct problems' including antisocial, aggressive, defiant and oppositional behaviours, such as non-compliance, fighting, arguing, throwing tantrums, rule breaking, and destruction of property. About a third of these children will continue to display these behaviours throughout adolescence.

Developmental crime prevention is an approach that focuses on both risk-creating and protective factors that have been shown to be associated with ending up in the criminal-justice system. Risk factors include poverty, violence, childhood trauma, abuse and neglect, school failure, antisocial peers, parents in prison, undiagnosed mental and substance-use disorders, and lack of attachment to homes, communities and people. Protective factors include a safe place to live, trauma-informed care, support with mental health, literacy, learning support, and a network of people in the home and community for a sense of belonging.

Early intervention is key, and is cost-effective. Early positive engagement can stop intergenerational cycles of trauma, offending and justice system involvement. The effects of abuse, neglect and maltreatment on children's development and behaviour can be successfully addressed at an earlier stage in the home, at school, in the community and in targeted mental health and other services, for a fraction of the cost of later imprisonment.

A developmental crime prevention approach can partner effectively with successful cultural approaches addressing the fact that, for instance, young Māori are significantly and persistently over-represented in the criminal-justice system, both as victims and offenders and that rates of violent offending by Pacific young people are

also disproportionately high. Collaboration with these communities, using culturally specific models and worldviews, and building the workforce and evidence base of effective prevention and intervention strategies, is needed.

Crucially, evidence shows that the younger the child is at intervention, the better the outcome is likely to be, especially if such interventions are consistent and sustained. The optimal response is likely to be a multi-pronged, multi-sector strategy that engages both the institutional (schools, ECE, Health, etc.) and the community (sports, churches, service clubs etc.) sectors to help build more inclusive communities and sustained social capital.

-ENDS-