

DIVERSION OF YOUNG OFFENDERS – THE BROSAN APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The increase in the prison population in recent times throughout Australia (an increase of almost 30% in the last three years in Victoria) should concern us because we know imprisonment is not effective in reducing crime. In addition prisons provide significant health risks to inmates and the broader community.

While politicians may claim this increase in the prison population as the success of harsher sentencing and more effective apprehension of offenders, there is little evidence that the crime rate has been effected.

Young people between 18 and 24 have the highest imprisonment rate of all age groups and it is this group that are also heavily involved in drug related offending.

The use of imprisonment as a strategy for dealing with drug related crime is a notable failure. Drug use remains undiminished and is a major feature of much criminal behaviour.

There is a clear need to divert young people from the prison system if we are to diminish this nexus between drugs and crime and unless we are content to have an ever increasing prison population.

WHAT WORKS

A recent report the United States Congress entitled 'Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising' has identified some key features of successful rehabilitation programs for offenders.¹ Such features include:

- Programs that are structured and focused, using multiple treatment components, with a focus on skill development, involving social, academic and employment skills.
- Programs that provide for substantial meaningful contact between treatment personnel and the participant.
- Programs that are designed to address the characteristics of the offenders that can be changed and that are associated with the individual's criminal activities.

Furthermore the research found that while many drug involved offenders are not treated while in the criminal justice system, nevertheless there is a growing body of research that indicates that treatment can reduce substance use and criminal recidivism.ⁱⁱ This was true for a number of different treatment systems and was the same whether participants were voluntary or coerced.

THE BROSNAN CENTRE

Its sometimes nice to have your own experience confirmed by the latest American research. While not exactly fitting the template provided by the report, the development of the Brosnan Centre has reflected some of the above principles namely:

- A practical approach, focussing on skills development, particularly living skills and employment.
- Being holistic, assisting with accommodation, income support, counselling and recreation.
- Relationship based. Brosnan staff develop relationships with young people in prisons and juvenile justice centres prior to their release and provide intensive support particularly in the early weeks of release.
- Client based. Each young person is an individual with individual circumstances and characteristics – workers attempts to craft an individual response to each young person.

CLIENT CHARACTERISTICS

There are some common characteristics that are evident in the young people who find themselves in prison. A recent survey of 40 young people (17-24) on remand in Victoria discovered that:

- Over half had not attended school regularly and the average age on leaving school was 15.
- 77% were unemployed at the time of arrest.
- Over half identified that the longest they had ever been in paid employment was six months or less.
- 25% had no contact with family
- 35% had left home because of conflict in the family
- 60% had spent some time in alternative care as children (foster care or residential care)
- 30% had been Wards of State
- 22% had no fixed place to live at the time of arrest
- and almost 40% had 6 or more addresses in the previous 12 months
- 87% were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of arrest

The repeated story of family conflict, unemployment, family violence, protracted periods of State care, little or disrupted education, drug use and offending from an early age is familiar to police, the Courts and community agencies.

The underlying feature of much of this is the experience of trauma, particularly child abuse and neglect.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIVERSION

Imprisonment does not act as a deterrent for young people fitting the above profile. Indeed for many of them prison is a familiar environment that they understand. The challenge is to more effectively address their capacity to re-join mainstream society after protracted periods of marginalisation.

The approach adopted at the Brosnan Centre attempts to begin this process of enticing young offenders back into the mainstream from a drug using and criminal sub-culture that has in many ways provided the only 'family' they know, albeit a dysfunctional one.

By assertive engagement with young people Brosnan staff create access to:

- Supported accommodation based on the leading tenant model. Over 20 houses with 2-3 residents each are currently operating, including a rooming house with 5 beds.
- Intensive outreach support which provides personal companionship and support, particularly in the immediate post-release period.
- Specialist counselling, particularly for those with co-existing problems of mental illness and drug use.
- Employment training and participation in pre-employment work programs.

This assertive engagement has historically targeted the most marginalised and disaffected young people in the system and has been able to develop special approaches for high needs groups such as intellectually disabled young offenders, Vietnamese young people and those with dual diagnosis.

The unit cost of this service is in the vicinity of \$6,000 to \$7,000 per person per annum which is a lot less than the current estimate of \$56,000 per annum contained in the current Australian Crime Facts and Figures produced by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception in 1977 the Brosnan Centre has evolved a significant practice wisdom in working with the most difficult young offenders in the community. Assertive engagement rather than coercion has been the basis for creating positive and productive relationships with young offenders.

It is a cost effective approach, particularly when compared with the costs of imprisonment.

While historically focussed on post-release support, the model is clearly capable of adaptation to be an alternative to a sentence of imprisonment rather than simply post release support.

ⁱ, Sherman, I. Gottfredson, D, Mac Kenzie, D, Eck, J, Reuter, P, Bushway ,S.,. *Preventing Crime, What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. A Report to the United States Congress. 1996 .Section 9-66.

ⁱⁱ Sherman et al 9-55