



Young people are often depicted in the media and elsewhere as constituting an increasingly dangerous and 'criminal' group. However, common perceptions of a 'juvenile crime wave' are not borne out by reality. There are many common misconceptions about young people and crime. This fact sheet details briefly some of these misconceptions, as well as examining a few important facts about 'youth crime'.

Are young people becoming more dangerous?

There has been no significant increase in juvenile crime over the past 2 years and serious juvenile crime appears to be decreasing. The number of Children's Court appearances for manslaughter decreased by 88%, aggravated sexual assault decreased by 18% and aggravated robbery decreased by 16% between 1999/00 and 2000/01.

The reoffending rate of juvenile offenders who went through Youth Conferencing was found to be 24% lower than the rate for those who went to court. Although it is hard to draw concrete conclusions from short term shifts in crime statistics, the idea that young people are becoming progressively more dangerous, is certainly challenged by these figures.

Who is at risk of being a victim of crime?

It is often assumed that older people are the population group most vulnerable to crime. However, it is people between 15-24 years of age who are most likely to be the victim of a

crime. People aged 65 and over are in fact the least likely to be the victim of a personal crime. In 1999, 10% of all young people experienced a crime against their person, whereas, in the same year only 1% of the elderly population experienced a personal crime.

Will 'tougher' penalties for young offenders decrease crime?

Tough penalties do not address the systemic social and health problems underlying juvenile offending. Poverty and neglect are the strongest predictors of juvenile crime and these are not addressed by punitive responses to crime. An increase of 1000 in the numbers of children subject to neglect could be expected to result in an additional 256 young people involved in crime. Putting resources into social service programs, programs to improve school retention rates, and programs to improve literacy would have a much more profound impact on lowering the crime rate than implementing harsh penalties.

In fact, severe penalties are associated with an increased likelihood of a juvenile re-offending. For example, in the period 1986 to 1994, only 12.4% of young people appearing in the Children's Court who received a nominal penalty re-offended. The recidivism rate increased to 79.3% of offenders who received a custodial order. In other words penalties that were 'less harsh' decreased the likelihood of re-offending.

Beyond bars: alternatives to custody

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Are youth gangs a problem in Australia?

Concern over youth gangs is an import from the United States. In Australia there are very few organised youth gangs. Young people generally act alone or in pairs. Most juvenile crime is episodic, transitory, local, unplanned, and not repeated. 70% of young people who offend once and appear in court do not subsequently reappear.

Why are so many young Aboriginal people in custody?

Police target Aboriginal young people, especially in country areas. This has resulted in a situation of continuing and increasing over-representation of Aboriginal children in custody. In the early 1990's, 26% of children in custody were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. In 1999 the figure had grown to 34% of the total population, and now in 2002 it stands at an alarming 44%.

Social and economic circumstances such as poverty, discrimination, child abuse, drug addiction and exclusion from education make Aboriginal young people both more visible and more vulnerable to involvement in the criminal justice system, and significantly more likely to be targets of police attention.

Are young people 'running wild'?

Research has shown that 80% of young people have been stopped and spoken to by the police at some stage. The proportions for Aboriginal and "marginal" youth are higher - 94% and 96% respectively. A report released by the Ombudsman in 1999 showed that young people are far more likely than adults to be searched and moved on by police.

Some research suggests that violence, threats and intimidation are routine aspects of street policing with particular groups of young people. In a recent report 78% of young people reported that police never, or only sometimes treat them with respect.

Perceptions of young people as 'criminal' and dangerous can be reinforced by disrespectful policing and the over surveillance of marginalised young people.

If we are serious about addressing youth crime, we need to also be serious about addressing the issues that make young people vulnerable to involvement in the criminal justice system. Whilst policing strategies are one area for consideration, it is also crucial to address the complicated and connected *causes* of the entanglement of certain groups of young people with the criminal justice system.



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