

Rethinking Crime and Punishment is a strategic initiative designed to increase the level of public debate about the use of prison and alternative forms of punishment in New Zealand



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Drivers of Crime - The Issue of Child Abuse



Child and Youth Offending Rates Continue to Drop

...Apprehension rates are dropping, which is good news, but we can't ignore the increase in violent offending in all age groups, especially the young.
Judge Andrew Becroft
Principal Youth Court Judge for New Zealand

'Court in the Act', the official newsletter for the Youth Justice system has issued a special edition on child and youth offending rates from 1992 – 2007. It's all good news:

Child and youth apprehension rates for 2006 and 2007 were the lowest since 1995. The rates for children were 320 and 333 per 10,000 population aged 10–13 respectively, while the rates for youth were 1,571 and 1,540 per 10,000 population of the relevant age groups.

Child and youth apprehension rates for property offences in 2007 were the lowest since 1995.

Over the 1995 to 2007 period, population-adjusted

In April 2009, over 100 participants met to identify the key issues at the Drivers of Crime Ministerial Meeting. It included people working at the frontline in crime and offending prevention, people working with victims of crime, academics, members of the judiciary, and members of parliament.

Over the next six months, Rethinking will explore further the issues identified in the Drivers of Crime Ministerial Meeting, asking such questions as:

- What is currently happening?
- "What Works"?
- What Looks Promising?
- What represents value for money?
- What more needs to happen – where should government put its resources?

The issue of death and serious injury of children in New Zealand was highlighted this week by release of a review of international literature and recent findings, entitled "**Death and serious injury from assault of children aged under 5 years in Aotearoa New Zealand: A review of international literature and recent findings**" [You can download a copy of the report here.](#)

In this edition, we take a look at the issue of child abuse, and describe a range of interventions which are effectively addressing the issue outside of referral to CYF. It also looks at a new approach – a 'whole-of-community' approach to child abuse prevention which has proved successful in the USA.

Child abuse is a significant issue in New Zealand, for no other reason than, as Professor Richie Poulton explained, "*Most people do not realise that the child abuse and domestic violence we are concerned about as adults, are perpetrated by people who have shown antisocial behaviour since childhood.*"

The people most likely to commit child abuse, are those who have themselves been abused as children. It is important to avoid the temptation to regard victims and offenders as demographically and morally distinct. The NZCASS reports that 50% of all victimizations are experienced by only 6% of New Zealanders and that the social and demographic indicators that identify those who are most likely to be victimized are identical to the markers for those likely to be offenders. The life stories and cultural contexts that weave victims and offenders together (often within the same person) make any attempt to separate the two an exercise in simplification. In the US, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency reported that the single greatest predictor of youth offending is prior victimisation (quoted in Herman).

[Read this week's lead newsletter article on child abuse.](#)

[Read the Drivers of Crime Report of Proceedings](#)

Americans Question the Wisdom of High Imprisonment Rates

A recent publication is causing Americans to seriously question the wisdom of increasing the level of imprisonment, in the face of a stable crime rate. Sound familiar? The new book edited by leading policy experts Steven Raphael and Michael A. Stoll, "Do Prisons

violence apprehensions increased for children and youth, as they did for all age groups, with children recording the lowest increase.

[Read the May 2009 Special Edition Newsletter ' Court in the Act'.](#)

Conditions for Prisoners Deteriorating

Rethinking has received an unprecedented number of phone calls over the last two months, concerned about the deterioration of conditions for New Zealand prisoners. That includes:

Planned overcrowding (sometimes called double bunking) at five prisons. All the evidence overseas points to an increase in violent incidents, self harm and suicides, mental health problems, assaults on staff, and less emphasis on the availability of work , recreation and rehabilitation.

Increased Lockdowns Prisoners are being locked in their cells at 5.0pm and not released until 8.0am the next day. This was at the seat of the riot at Ngawha last month, resulting in a number of prison officers being seriously hurt.

Reduction in Quality of Mental Health Services Funding available for mental health services has not kept pace with the increase in demand.

Withdrawal of Legal Aid for Parole Board Appearances Lawyers are reporting that they can no longer get legal aid to represent prisoners appearing before the Parole Board. They report that some of their clients are inarticulate, and quite unable to present their case for release without support. Nor do they have the capability to ensure that the judicial process is properly observed.

Rethinking will continue to campaign for a Human Rights Framework for New Zealand Prisons. Conditions for prisoners are rapidly deteriorating , without any monitoring of the cumulative effect on the basic human rights of prisoners.

“Make Us Safer? The Benefits and Costs of the Prison Boom” examines the repercussions of the massive build up of the U.S. prison system and asks whether such an expensive system, which has devastating impacts on so many minority families, produces societal benefits worth the costs.

It comes to the conclusion that alternative social welfare policies such as education and employment programs for at-risk youth lower crime just as effectively as prisons, but at a much lower human cost.

It concludes that criminal behavior accounted for only a small fraction of the prison boom. Eighty-five percent of the rise in incarceration can be attributed to “get tough on crime” policies that have increased both the likelihood of a prison sentence and the length of time served. It concludes that:

- While prison time effectively deters and incapacitates criminals in the short term, such long-term benefits as overall crime reduction or individual rehabilitation are less clear cut.
- Placement in a high-security penitentiary leads to increased rates of violence and anger—particularly in the case of first time or minor offenders
- Children who have had a parent serve prison time exhibit more behavioral problems than their peers. Policies to enhance the well-being of these children are essential to breaking a devastating cycle of poverty, unemployment, and crime.
- Economic calculations suggest that alternative social welfare policies such as education and employment programs for at-risk youth may lower crime just as effectively as prisons, but at a much lower human cost.

How many more years will elapse before the truth sinks in, here in Aotearoa?

[To order a copy of the book click here](#)

A Quiet Revolution

Youth Court judges are quietly revolutionising the way they deal with drug offenders, making changes which could soon be emulated in adult courts.

Instead of simply sentencing young addicts to be punished for crimes such as stealing, judges are adjourning their cases while the youths attend treatment programmes and then talking to them every week or fortnight to keep them on track.

In two local experiments - a specialist Youth Drug Court in Christchurch and an "intensive monitoring group" in Auckland - the youngsters are brought into court every fortnight to tell judges how their treatment is going.

In other cases, judges are making weekly telephone conference calls with young addicts and their lawyers, therapists, social workers, police youth aid officers and anyone else involved in their rehabilitation.

[Read more here](#)