

“Tough on crime” approach will not make communities safer

May 2023

Punitive, populist tough on crime approaches to the harmful behavior of children might make for good media, but they do not make Tasmanian communities safer.

Labelling children as “teen crooks” or “youth gangs” and signaling a need for a “baby thug blitz” is unhelpful, harmful and shows blatant disregard for the rights of children and our obligation as adults to care for them and to support their development.

In reality, most children never come into contact with the criminal justice system - youth offending rates have been steadily declining since the 2000s.

However, when families are under-resourced and under pressure, when services to help them are scarce, their children can fall through the cracks.

In some cases, children can exhibit harmful behaviours. Harmful to themselves and harmful to others.

This can include behaviours like shop lifting, property damage and, in the most concerning of cases, violence and abuse.

These behaviours affect individuals and communities, sometimes in the worst of ways, and should never be dismissed or belittled.

However, children should be helped to understand the impacts of their behaviour, to make amends and supported to change their life trajectory. Tasmania’s current youth justice system is not fit for purpose and does not enable this to happen.

“Youth crime” is a populist term which blames young people entirely for their harmful behaviour. Children with harmful behaviours should not shoulder the blame alone. This is a community problem and requires whole-of-community solutions to solve it.

The fact is that children’s harmful behaviour does not emerge in isolation. Children do not simply wake up one morning and decide that today is a good day to behave in a way that might harm others.

This behaviour emerges in the context of circumstances usually outside of their control including poverty, exposure to family violence, abuse and other child-maltreatment, homelessness, disability, mental ill health and lack of opportunity.



When the universal systems underpinning the wellbeing of our children struggle to meet their needs, we are more likely to see more children and families struggling to hold things together.

When statutory services like child protection and youth justice are not well resourced or indeed fit for purpose and when there are very limited options available to families to help with escalating behaviours in the home and the community, children fall through the cracks.

It is a sad indictment on our community when the go-to response for responding to harmful behaviour of children as young as 10 is the criminal justice system.

Tasmania Police, to their credit, work hard to divert children from the formal criminal justice system. However, they have few options available to them.

Many Tasmanian children are homeless, even children under the guardianship of the state. Mental health services are scarce and residential drug and alcohol services for children in Tasmania are non-existent.

This is the harsh reality of the situation in Tasmania. We are not adequately supporting the children and families who need support in the face of rising costs and rising complexities.

A new team of police, who, according to media reports are motivated to arrest more children, might engender a feeling of safety among some in the community in the short term.

However, in the longer term, this will only amplify the problem if policing is the sole response. We will not arrest our way out of this complex problem.

We need far greater investment in programs that support families to thrive and steer children away from engaging in harmful behaviour in the first place.

Internationally, holistic, therapeutic, culturally appropriate and community-based approaches have been proven to change the life trajectory for children and their families – this is where investment should be prioritised.

More police on the beat with a pro-arrest approach will only drive more children into detention, where restrictive practices currently see them locked down in their cells for much of each day, further deteriorating their wellbeing.

There are no winners in that scenario.

Leanne McLean
Commissioner for Children and Young People