

New insights make rehabilitation programs even more effective at reducing youth re-offending

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In April 2013 the Guardian for Children and Young People in South Australia published an interview with Professor Andrew Day which discussed the importance of rehabilitation for those young people who find themselves involved with the justice system. It pointed to the research evidence that clearly shows that good programs, when they are well implemented, can reduce youth re-offending rates by up to 40 per cent. It argued that the most effective programs are those that are delivered by well-trained and motivated staff who receive good supervision and support.

So, what has changed in offender rehabilitation since that time?

Well, in some ways, not very much. The evidence continues to accumulate that young offender rehabilitation programs can, and do, reduce offending behaviour, particularly when they target those who are at high risk of committing further offences. And yet there have also been changes in the last few years in how we think about rehabilitation. We have, for example, begun to move away from a focus on 'treatment' programs that view risk as a personality trait that needs to be modified, to more sophisticated approaches that consider how the risk of offending develops over the life of a young person.

Researchers and practitioners are now more aware of how understanding the consequences of child maltreatment might be directly relevant to the attempt to rehabilitate. And, of course, we know that maltreatment is widespread in the histories of young people who find themselves in the youth justice system. In one of our recent studies¹, 24 of the 28 young people we interviewed in a youth justice centre, told us that they had experienced at least one of the events listed in a childhood trauma questionnaire. Death of a close friend or family member was the most commonly reported experience, followed by parental divorce and violence. We speculated that this can result in high levels of unresolved trauma and that it is this that often acts as a key driver of antisocial behaviour.

Our other recent studies have analysed the large datasets that are held about South Australian young people and mapped out the complex associations that exist between the experience of being maltreated, being placed in out-of-home care, and youth offending² – links that have been repeatedly documented in the international literature, but apply equally to South Australia.³ We find that it is the type, timing, and recurrence of maltreatment that influences whether a child will go on to become involved with the justice system. In particular, neglect and/or maltreatment that either starts or continues into adolescence are emerging as two of the strongest predictors of antisocial behaviour. It is also clear that maltreatment gives rise to a number of other disadvantages (such as

¹ See Malvaso, C., Day, A., Casey, S., & Corrado, R. (2016). Young offenders, maltreatment and trauma: A pilot study. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2016.1247682>

² See Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P., & Day, A. (2017). The child protection and juvenile justice nexus in Australia: A longitudinal examination of the relationship between maltreatment and offending. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *64*, 32-46. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.028; Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P., & Day, A. (2017). Child maltreatment and criminal convictions in youth: The role of gender, ethnicity and placement experiences in an Australian population. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *73*, 57-65. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.12.001

³ For a review see Malvaso, C. G., Delfabbro, P. H., & Day, A. (2016). Risk factors that influence the maltreatment-offending association: A systematic review of prospective and longitudinal studies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *31*, 1-15.

difficulties in learning and educational under-achievement, mental health issues and problematic substance use) that, in turn, influence youth offending.

It is also evident that those young people who are involved in both the out-of-home care and youth justice systems, often referred to as the 'crossover' group, are a particularly traumatised group. We know that these young people start offending at an earlier age, commit nearly twice as many offences, and are more likely to continue offending into adulthood, than their peers. Other factors, such as instability in their care placement, appear to only exacerbate or compound early vulnerabilities and problem behaviour.

In the light of this, what might young offender rehabilitation programs of the future look like?

In the last few years, we have been hearing more and more about the importance of trauma-informed care when working with young people. This is not only the province of 'programs', but something that we can all contribute to – whether we work as psychologists, youth or residential care workers, family members or friends of young offenders. When we are around people who have been traumatised, we can be much more effective if we show that we understand the effects of life events on personal development and recognise the difficulties that face young people who are trying to find services that increase their sense of safety and hope. We also now know how important it is to support young people to take charge of their own lives and to take control over their actions and enhance their ability to make important life decisions. Given the disproportionate involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the care and justice systems, deep understanding of the cultural context and the inter-generational impacts of maltreatment is also particularly important.

When working with young people who have experienced maltreatment and trauma, it is very clear that our actions will always speak louder than our words. We need to be reliable, trustworthy, and authentic in our desire to help at all times. Put simply, by focusing on resilience and strengths and helping young people to plan for their futures we will be much more effective than simply relying on strategies that punish bad behaviour.

At the same time, the links between offending behaviour and trauma are not readily accepted by some in our community. For some, this approach is seen as offering a 'free pass' that allows young people to avoid accepting responsibility for their behaviour. And so one of our major challenges is to find ways to take a more trauma-informed approach whilst still holding young people accountable for their actions.

Targeting the underlying causes of antisocial behavior will also inevitably involve a major change in how we think about service configurations. It will challenge current organisational structures that differentiate between services that respond to the care and protection needs of children and those that address adolescent mental health and substance use problems – as well as those that focus on reducing engagement with the criminal justice system. Too often now these services operate in isolation from each other.

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