

Simon Denny: Managing Youth Crime

7 March 2023

Original event description

The Speaker

Simon is a New Zealand trained paediatrician, adolescent physician and epidemiologist, currently Director of the Mater's Adolescent and Young Adult Service. He has a wealth of experience in the epidemiology of youth dysfunction in both New Zealand and Australia. In Brisbane he also runs a young adult drug dependency program, and Threads, a service for troubled youth.

The Discussion

Simon discussed recent high-profile cases of what at times has been extreme youth violence, but set this against a background of a well-documented progressive decline in such criminality since about 2008. The reasons for this decline are unclear, but the possibility that smart phones might be part of this is certainly circumstantially suggested. In addition to reduced criminality, there has been a marked decline in teenage pregnancy, and in the consumption of alcohol and tobacco and other drugs. There has also, however, been an increase in self-harm and suicide in this period.

One theory suggested there had been a decrease in "externalising" and an increase in "internalising" behaviours. There was some pushback from the audience, who noted the recent high frequency of home invasion and car thefts; they wondered whether, although there might have been an overall decline in crime, there was an increase in crimes of specific kinds. Statistics on this were less clear. Simon detailed the extensive science behind youth dysfunction, and the wide understanding of its origins. In particular, he pointed to the importance of "childhood adverse events", which were very strong predictors of later social dysfunction. These include antisocial behaviour and oppositional defiance behaviour through to overt criminality. The essential function of the family in raising, nurturing and supporting children, particularly as they entered adolescence, was key. "Strain theory" describes the importance of adolescents being able to "see a way forward to adulthood". The notable suffering of first nation people and their children, and the effects of intergenerational trauma, were a particular Australian sadness.

Simon discussed the considerable evidence base of solutions to dysfunctional behaviour. These include restorative justice, court diversion, prison, awareness programs, focussed deterrence with hotspot policing, knife and weapons amnesties, programs to increase social skills in young people, after-school care, and CBT. Amongst the most effective intervention was "multisystemic treatment" (MST) of both the subject and the family, which could result in a decrease in offending of between 16% and 25%. This required skilled individual therapy teams and might last 6 months. Enrolments in sporting programs where there is wraparound care and individual

support had been shown to reduce recidivism by up to 50%. Boot camps were less effective, though programs which address individual needs had some benefit.

Although these interventions were expensive, there was an enormous return on investment with MST: for example, resulting in a net gain to the community of \$10,000 through prevented criminality and its costs. The high costs of incarceration were also noted as part of this, and the negative role of incarceration in socialising adolescents into a lifetime of criminality. It has been estimated that up to \$1 million could be saved for every child diverted from criminality.

There was an active dialogue after Simon's presentation, with audience members commenting on the dysfunction in child protection services in Queensland, and the state's inability to provide an adequate family environment. The very low numbers of adoptions contributed to the problem. This appeared to be an intractable problem, with several governments of a variety of political persuasions failing to find solutions.

Brisbane Dialogues is very grateful to Simon Denny for sharing his expertise and shedding light on what is a very immediate and topical issue.

Simon Bowler and Roly Sussex, 13/3/2023

