

# Community development in action: reducing youth crime

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## Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between disadvantage in communities and crime. Due to the increasing rates of imprisonment, which are not reducing crime, there are growing calls for changes to be made to the penal justice system, particularly for young people. Current responses to youth crime appear largely ineffectual with increasing imprisonment rates. There are growing calls for changes to be made to support young people and their families and communities. There are two current community development programs in Australia which have shown positive results in reducing and preventing youth crime and imprisonment rates, which provide a positive alternative for crime prevention by working collaboratively with, and empowering communities. Social workers have been identified as playing a key role in this process.

## Keywords

Juvenile justice; community development; disadvantage

## Introduction

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Youth crime rates in Australia have remained at consistently high levels for decades (Commonwealth of Australia [COA], 2013) despite concerted efforts to reduce and prevent offending. Moreover, the progressive punitive nature of Australia's criminal justice system which aims to deter criminal behaviour and reduce crime rates has resulted in increased imprisonment rates and has not positively influenced crime rates (COA, 2013). This suggests that the current punitive system is failing at achieving the stated goals and an urgent change is required to ensure that future generations of young people do not end up in juvenile detention centres.

I was drawn to Social Work after seeing a documentary about young sex offenders who were working alongside social workers and psychologists in America. The young people were involved in a program which focused on addressing the negative experiences they had as a child which led them to commit the sexual offences. The stories of these young people were listened to and a focus was placed on helping them to process what had happened to them, and what they had done, in order to effectively reintegrate them back into their families and into the community. In 2016 my interest in juvenile justice was heightened further after watching ABC's Four Corners program called *Backing Bourke* (see Ferguson, 2016b). I became aware of the importance of early intervention and prevention which could save many young people from entering the criminal justice system. After doing further research I could see the evidence for community development as an effective method for preventing youth crime rates, and the lack of change to current punitive criminal justice systems which are not serving our youth.

My interest in this area led me to want to understand more about how community development can be used, and what circumstances and events influence the life course of a young person. This paper explores the relationship between disadvantage in communities and crime, and the

current approaches being used to respond to youth crime. Two programs in Australia, including the program in Bourke which sparked my interest in this topic, are explored in this paper to further understand the different methods which can be used in community development to effectively reduce and prevent crime.

This paper does not focus specifically on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however due to the overrepresentation within the criminal system they are a main recipient group for community development programs. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore young people, as they have been identified as a disadvantaged group which is highly represented in offending and imprisonment rates (COA, 2013; Clancey, 2016; Cooper et al., 2016; Goldson, 2005; Greenwood, 2008; Homel et al., 2015). Systems and strengths based theory are two theories which I find highly valuable in understanding crime and working with individuals and communities, thus my analysis of current systems and the potential of community development draws primarily from my understanding of these theories, however this does not limit my analysis to these two alone. Whilst issues of recidivism and the need for further support upon release are briefly discussed, the scope of this paper is focused on early intervention, prevention and alternatives to imprisonment. Further research would be required to recidivism and support on release in depth.

After reviewing the literature and deciding on my area of focus for this paper, I devised the following research question to focus on:

What role do community development programs play in preventing crime in disadvantaged communities?

## Context

There is a growing body of research to support the link between disadvantaged communities and crime (COA, 2013; Farkas & Jones, 2007; Goldson, 2005; Goodwin & Young, 2013; Halsey, 2006a, 2006b; Homel et al., 2015; Trotter et al., 2019; Wikström & Loeber, 2000). For individuals living in disadvantaged communities, low socioeconomic status, lower access to education and health care, geographical isolation and low employment rates have all been identified as risk factors for criminal behaviour and increasing imprisonment rates (COA, 2013; Farkas & Jones, 2007; Goodwin & Young, 2013; Halsey, 2006b; Wikström & Loeber, 2000). Furthermore, Halsey's (2006b) explanation of social theories of crime shows us that crime is situated within and influenced by social structures and conditions and is an individual's response to their environment.

Imprisonment rates in Australia, particularly NSW, have been increasing significantly over the past three decades, with a 17 percent increase seen over a 2-year period (COA, 2013). In NSW, almost half of the young people in prisons are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Just Reinvest NSW Inc, n.d.). This is a substantial overrepresentation given that Indigenous young people make up less than 5 percent of the general population (KPMG, 2018). Moreover, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are 21 times more likely to be incarcerated than those who are non-indigenous (KPMG, 2018). For Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people living in remote areas or in the lowest socioeconomic status areas, they are 4 and 5 times (respectively) more likely to offend (KPMG, 2018). Not only is this devastating for Indigenous and non-indigenous communities, it is also creating an economic burden, with \$1,344 of taxpayer money being used per day to keep just one young person incarcerated (Just Reinvest NSW Inc., n.d.). Furthermore, the cost of imprisonment for young people is significantly higher than for adults (COA, 2013). These costs represent poor government and fiscal policy

given that the continued increasing imprisonment rates are not influencing rates of crime and recidivism among young people (COA, 2013). Despite the *Young Offenders Act 1997* (NSW) stating that youth will be supported to ensure that they are rehabilitated and do not reoffend, the lack of positive results from harsher sentencing and bail conditions suggests that the current punitive system is not having the desired effect.

Calls for penal reform have been made for many years, however there has been little change to the current system. In 1995 formal recognition of the need for local crime prevention saw the introduction of specialised departments such as the Juvenile Crime Prevention Unit, which was followed in 1997 by the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act 1997* (NSW). These formal structures then enabled the introduction of community development in order to work collaboratively and democratically with communities (Clancey, 2016). However, after an increase of reported crime and an inability to show success of local crime prevention in the decade that followed, community development approaches were gradually replaced by government agencies assuming a more prominent role, and police gained more power in the crime prevention movement (Clancey, 2016). This has resulted in fewer community development programs, and a lack of consultation and engagement with communities. Although current legislation suggests that the aims of imprisonment are to rehabilitate and deter crime, this is not reflected in imprisonment and crime rates (COA, 2013). The conditions of juvenile detention centres expose young people to an environment where violence and other negative behaviours are normalised and young people are experiencing high levels of abuse and violence (Goldson, 2005). In 2016 an ABC Four Corners report *Australia's Shame* (Ferguson, 2016a) brought these issues to the forefront of media and policy debates. The report exposed mistreatment, abuse and even torture techniques being used on children and young people as young as 10 years old in juvenile detention at Don Dale in the Northern Territory (Ferguson, 2016a). Due to the high numbers of Indigenous youth in the detention centre this report devastated the Indigenous population, however the seriousness of the evidence shown sparked outrage throughout the entire Australian population (Koziol, 2016). This highlighted how the imprisonment of children and young people was ineffective at rehabilitation and reducing crime rates, with many of the young people stating that they felt unable to reintegrate back into their communities and thus would reoffend (Ferguson, 2016a). Disadvantage was common among the young people detained, with some having been incarcerated for minor crimes such as breaking into a car in order to find a safe place to sleep for the night (Ferguson, 2016a), reflecting mandatory and harsh sentencing laws as well as the lack of programs to help divert young people from being imprisoned (COA, 2013). Furthermore, it displays a lack of acknowledgement from governments of the risk factors which increase the chances of young people living in disadvantaged communities of offending.

The punitive nature of Australia's criminal justice system, and the conditions faced by young people who are imprisoned, are detrimental to the mental and physical health and wellbeing of young people, and drastically reduces their chances of being positively and effectively reintegrated into society (Goldson, 2005). These issues are exacerbated even further due to a lack of support upon their release, making it very difficult for young people to meet the generic, unrealistic and harsh bail conditions set by the courts (Halsey, 2006a). However, with a growing body of research highlighting the link between disadvantage and crime, community development is becoming a more widely used approach to divert young people from offending, and reduce crime and imprisonment rates in Australia and globally.

## Defining community and community development

Butterfield & Chisanga (2013) argue that there are two main types of communities; geographical and relational (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013). They define geographical communities as those united by their location, such as a town, city or country, whereas relational communities are united by similar interests or traits, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status or hobbies (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013). Individuals usually belong to multiple communities, and due to the intersectional nature of disadvantage can experience myriad types of disadvantage within each of these communities. For example, a young Aboriginal boy who lives in a low socioeconomic rural town will have less access to education, work and health care, be marginalised for his cultural and ethnic identity and may live in poverty. These are all factors which have been identified as key risk factors which increase the chances of the young person offending and thereby increases their risk of imprisonment (Homel et al., 2015; Goodwin & Young, 2013). Understanding the different types of communities, and that these usually intersect, can help to grow awareness of the different areas that community development can be implemented.

Community development “is a planned approach to improving the standard of living and general well-being of people” (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013) and their communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. With a growing body of research highlighting the link between disadvantage and crime, community development is becoming a more widely used approach to reduce crime and imprisonment rates in Australia and globally. Butterfield & Chisanga (2013) argue that due to different professions taking different approaches to community development it can, at times, become fragmented. However, given the complex systems of communities they note that community development is most often a collaborative interdisciplinary project, allowing different methods to be brought together to meet the varied needs of the community (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013). Campfens (1997) advocates for a participatory approach whereby government agencies work collaboratively with communities to ensure that they are resourced sufficiently to develop and implement the appropriate programs.

Using systems and strengths-based theories, community development is a holistic approach which empowers individuals and communities to create positive change by actively participating in the development and implementation of programs (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013; Campfens, 1997; Farkis & Jones, 2007; Goodwin & Young, 2013). Helping to build social inclusion, promote self-reliance and capacity building are other key components of community development (Campfens, 1997). Community Development practice involves actively engaging the community in identifying the issues that exist and what changes they want to achieve. Goodwin & Young (2013) identified that being involved in the process was particularly important for children and young people who felt that they had valuable insight and opinions to give. Ohmer & Owens (2013) present the use of photovoice as a creative and engaging way that adults and young people can be involved in this process. They found that this process of identifying issues allowed community members to take ownership of developing and implementing effective methods, such as communal garden plots (Ohmer & Owens).

By focusing on the known risk factors which increase crime rates, community development provides an opportunity to create place specific programs which can mitigate risk factors. There are many different programs which could be implemented as part of a community development. Two examples of projects in Australia which have used different approaches to reach positive results are outlined below.

## Community development in action

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### Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project

In response to increasing imprisonment rates and costs, justice reinvestment has been introduced in the United States, United Kingdom and now in Australia (KPMG, 2018). The approach redirects money spent on prisons into communities through development programs which reduce crime and recidivism rates, especially in disadvantaged communities. The US has shown promising results of lower crime and imprisonment rates, thus enabling the closure of some prisons (Brown et al., 2016). Bourke, NSW has been involved in a trial of justice reinvestment via Just Reinvest NSW, called the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Program. The town has high rates of crime and a large Indigenous population and was identified as requiring immediate support and intervention (KPMG, 2018).

Justice reinvestment is a community-led collaborative approach. In Bourke, this means that community members, Indigenous elders, teachers and police are working alongside social workers and other professionals to identify the needs of the community and to create programs and interventions that are specifically designed to meet those needs. An important aspect of being community-led is that the community wants to be involved in the program and have a desire to improve certain aspects of their community (Campfens, 1997; Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013; Farkis & Jones, 2007; Goodwin & Young, 2013). This ensures that community members are willing to participate and can actively engage with the creation and implementation of programs. For the community of Bourke, the project was welcomed as it provided a tailored response to their specific needs and the concerns they have for the future and wellbeing of their young people (Ferguson, 2016b; KPMG, 2018).

The results of the programs implemented through the project from 2016-2017 have shown promising results. In their most recent report, Just Reinvest NSW note that the project uses a life course approach, acknowledging that support is required from birth to meet the different needs throughout the life course (KPMG, 2018). As such, they developed a range of programs to meet the needs of all age groups within the community, including infant health development checks, driving lessons and football teams. The football team targets the men of Bourke creating a social activity for the men to engage in, however it also came with conditions that the men must not be involved in domestic violence offences as this was known as being a significant problem within the community. Soon after the implementation of this program they noticed that men were holding themselves, and each other, more accountable for their actions, and if someone did commit an offence of domestic violence they would be suspended from games and would have continued discussions with their team mates and coach (Ferguson, 2016b; KPMG, 2018). This program was used alongside increased outreach by the towns police, who started to do check-up visits with the offender and the victim after a domestic violence incidence had occurred. They found that this provided a more personal experience and created a stronger sense of understanding between the community and the police (Ferguson, 2016b). Another identified issue for the town was the high number of driving offences, especially those of driving without a licence. Birrang Learner Driver Program was implemented to provide free driving lessons and to assist those who do not have literacy skills with their application forms as well as assistance for those who do not have identification documents. These programs have shown positive results, with a 23% reduction in reported domestic violence incidents, and a significant increase in the number of drivers' licence received, which has allowed many community members to gain employment (Ferguson, 2016b; KPMG, 2018). Furthermore, the program has been assessed as having a substantial



financial impact with potential to continue to save millions of dollars if the project is continued (KPMG, 2018).

## Pathways to Prevention Project

The Pathways to Prevention Project, by comparison, focused on the effectiveness of family support in preventing youth crime rates in disadvantaged communities (Homel et al., 2015). The program set out to “strengthen the developmental system in a disadvantaged area” which they describe as including “the web of institutions, relationships and primary care settings that shape and are shaped by children, young people and parents” (Homel et al., 2015 p. 1). Homel et al. (2015) note that family support is a common form of early intervention, however those who live in disadvantaged communities do not receive the same level of support as the individuals living in advantaged communities.

The Pathways to Prevention Project was run in a community in Brisbane between 2002 – 2011, designed to assess the long-term outcomes of family support. The project worked with 7 local schools in the area to provide support services to families and children. Families and children could choose when and which services and programs they used and participated in, which allowed the researchers to gain an understanding on the efficacy of not only the programs but also the varied levels of participation (Homel et al., 2015). Programs included school activities, playgroups, play therapy and counselling. The results of the program were promising, showing the potential that greater numbers of contact with services can improve behavioural outcomes for children, however the authors note that more research is needed with larger samples (Homel et al., 2015).

Whilst the researchers worked alongside Mission Australia and teachers from the school, they did not involve the families or children in the development and implementation of the programs. Although families and children were able to actively decide their level of participation in the programs, they lacked the ability to contribute to the development. This is a limitation of this study, and if community involvement was increased throughout the process in future applications of this project there is the potential that results could improve even further, as community members would feel empowered to promote the change they are hoping to see within their community. However, the project provides valuable information into the types of programs that can be used in community development and identifies the key role of family support within holistic approaches to preventing crime.

## Moving forward: Applying the research to Social Work

A growing body of research has shown that there is a link between disadvantage and crime rates, thus making it imperative that more is done to address these inequalities (COA, 2013; Farkas & Jones, 2007; Goldson, 2005; Goodwin & Young, 2013; Halsey, 2006a, 2006b; Homel et al., 2015; Trotter et al, 2019; Wikström & Loeber, 2000). Media and public opinion have pushed for greater punishment of offenders, rather than addressing the issues which have led the individual to offend. Social workers have a privileged position as we understand the systemic and social structures which influence the development and life course of individuals. This knowledge can be used positively to support and empower communities and advocate for change to policy. The Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project and The Pathways to Prevention Project provide working examples of the role that community development can play in preventing youth crime in disadvantaged communities.

Rather than continue to spend money on imprisonment, which has been shown as ineffective at reducing crime rates, the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project provides a way to redirect

these funds into sustainable and effective community development programs. Justice reinvestment therefore uses money already budgeted for preventing crime and diverts it to a program which is more effective and strengthens entire communities, rather than focusing on individuals. A key part of community development identified earlier is building relationships and trust with communities (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013; Campfen, 1997). This is where social workers can play a key role, using interpersonal and empathy skills to build strong relationships with communities and to ensure that their voices are prioritised throughout the duration of community development programs. By having a key social worker, or team of social workers, supporting and empowering the community, community members may be more likely to embrace the process and continue to engage with other professionals. There are potential issues of difference of opinions, as community development requires interdisciplinary collaboration (Butterfield & Chisanga, 2013). This provides many benefits as it increases the knowledge and resources available to the community, however, also increases the chances of varied values and goals. Social workers can use their skills to navigate these difficult discussions and advocate for the community. In doing so, community development can become an effective and collaborative approach to build and strengthen disadvantage communities in Australia.

## Conclusion

Community development has been shown as an effective method of preventing youth crime in disadvantaged communities in Australia and around the world. It provides a collaborative approach whereby communities play a key role in developing and implementing programs to meet their needs and ensures long term engagement with professionals and the programs. Although there has previously been a reduction in community development in Australia (Clancey, 2016), there is now growing calls for the implementation of community development especially in disadvantaged communities. The Maranguka Justice Reinvestment and Pathways to Prevention Projects are current working examples of the positive results that can be gained through community development and provide evidence for the implementation of such programs in more communities across Australia. Social workers will play a key role here, by helping to support communities and to contribute to the research already available so that more communities can benefit from community development programs and Australia's youth crime and imprisonment rates can be reduced.

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