

Governments should divert youths from prison

Programs to divert young people from offending behaviour and entering juvenile prison can be both more effective than putting them in custody and up to 50 times cheaper, according to Mission Australia (MA).

The community organisation says that diversionary programs designed to keep young people from re-offending can cut rates by more than half and reduce serious offences by close to two-thirds.

MA is asking Australian state and territory governments to set targets to reduce the numbers of juveniles in detention and expand the number of successful diversionary programs.

CLA has already called, in one of its Australia Day letters for 2009, for WA to set targets to reduce the Indigenous incarceration rate below 40% in that state - but the Minister responsible has refused to take up the challenge (see <http://www.cla.asn.au/0805/index.php?blog=24> for the WA Minister's response, and for the CLA Australia Day letter)

MA's spokesperson, Anne Hampshire, said in June 2009 that an upturn in the number of young people in custody, high levels of recidivism and the significant cost of locking young people up highlighted the need for alternative ways to tackle a rising problem.

"Around 13,000 young people go through state/territory juvenile justice systems every year. Nearly 1000 young Australians are in detention on any day and numbers are at a four-year high," she said. "While only 5% of Australia's 10-17 year olds are Indigenous, they make up 40% of all young people in the nation's juvenile justice systems.

"Putting young offenders in custody is both expensive and ineffective. More than half released from detention will re-offend. Detention also intensifies the need for greater support post-release.

"For example, in NSW it costs in excess of \$150,000 to keep a juvenile in custody for 12 months."

One five-year-old MA program cut offence rates among participants by more than half, Ms Hampshire said. Serious offences – such as assault – were reduced by close to two-thirds, and 65% of participants had not re-offended within 12 months of program completion.

"Impressively, these outcomes were achieved for around \$2500 per person – the average cost of an individual receiving program support for three-to-six months.

MA's snapshot publication, *Young people and the criminal justice system: New insights and promising responses*, is available at:

http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/document-downloads/doc_details/126-young-people-and-the-criminal-justice-system-new-insights-and-promising-responses

Juvenile justice key statistics, according to MA

- National rate at which young people are placed in custody is 31 in every 100,000. States/territories above that: NSW (38), WA (56) and NT (99). Victoria, which places greater emphasis on diversionary and preventative programs has a rate of 9 in every 100,000.

- Reports in early 2009 said more than 5000 young people in NSW were placed on remand in 2007-08, up from 3600 in 2005/06. This cost \$45m compared to \$30m in 2005/06.
- Because of overcrowding in juvenile centres, the NSW Government spends \$2400 a day to lock underage youth in police cells with police paid \$100 per hour overtime to guard them.
- 161 is the average daily population of WA juveniles in custody in WA (2007/08) up from up 139 (2006/07). Young Indigenous people make up 75% of all inmates.
- Of 190 receptions into NT juvenile detention centres (2007-08), 170 – or 89% – were young Indigenous people.
- Young Indigenous Queenslanders are placed in detention at a rate 15 times that of non-Indigenous youth.

The media release, on which this article is based, was also featured in a news story in *The Australian* on 16 June 2009, headed: *Teenager offender scheme under cloud*.

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