

## Part 7 Eleven Themes at The Asquith Group Case Study

### **11. Diversion**

All available evidence suggests that young people coming into contact with the justice system are some of Victoria's most vulnerable. For example, the Youth Parole Board and Youth Residential Board Annual Report for 2013-14 highlights that a significant number of young people in youth detention come from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, with 89% having a history of alcohol and/or drug misuse, 60% having been victims of child abuse, trauma or neglect, 59% being current or former child protection clients, and 56% having been suspended or expelled from school.

The earlier children and young people have contact with the justice system, the more likely they are to experience further problems with the law, particularly when there are underlying factors. It is imperative that those in the middle years especially are diverted from the justice system into support services at the earliest opportunity. While there have been or are a few valuable pre-plea diversion programs, (including ROPES and Right Step), these have been either limited in scope, locality and/or have had insecure funding.

The **Victorian government's investment** in a Youth Diversion Pilot program is welcome. We are aware that following a tender process, Jesuit Social Services (JSS) is the provider of this 2105 / 16 program, together with the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS), who will target young people with little or no history of offending. However we do note that as a Pilot, this Program operates for a limited period (12 months), and caters to limited numbers.

There is a strong case to be made for greater investment in diversion programs as part of a bigger package of programs and services in the community, rather than spending money to keep individuals in prisons. For example the cost of new prison infrastructure and expansion of prisons to accommodate an increasing prison population within Victoria is in the hundreds of million of dollars.

The 2013–2014 Victorian State Budget committed an extra \$131.5 million on top of the \$819 million prison funding announced last year to extending the prison system.

Prisons are pretty ineffective in preventing reoffending. Imprisonment in many cases is likely to have a negative impact on a young offenders offending trajectory. In Victoria, the most recent data shows reoffending rates of 57 per cent amongst juveniles sentenced to detention. It is widely accepted incarceration foster further criminality. Prison can diminish the health, economic and social outcomes in a young person's life whilst also increasing the risk factors associated with offending.

Diversion early in the criminal justice process offers a less costly and more effective way of addressing youth offending, especially when compared to the cost of detention or further matters coming before the court. Community based diversion and support programs cost about one tenth of what detention of a young offender in a youth justice facility costs Government.

Resourcing programs in the community that address the underlying causes of young people's offending by promoting rehabilitation and reintegration are key to preventing their trajectory into the criminal justice system and reducing reoffending. This is particularly the case given the well-known indicators of disadvantage that are characteristic of young people entering the criminal justice system, such as mental illness, alcohol and or substance abuse, and child abuse, trauma or neglect.

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**Backlinks:**

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