

# **Sending out an SOS: Enlisting Local Government to Help Fight Youth Offending**

**Local Government New Zealand Conference  
Christchurch, 28 July 2009**

**Judge Andrew Becroft  
Principal Youth Court Judge  
Te Kaiwhakawa Matua o Te Kooti Taiohi**



**THE YOUTH COURT OF NEW ZEALAND | TE KOOITI TAIOHI O AOTEAROA**



# Outline

1. Introduction: 2 Points
2. The fundamental importance of understanding the two different types of youth offenders
3. The causes of youth offending: Not an easy topic! Better to talk of risk and resiliency factors
4. The big issues for youth justice from a Local Government perspective
5. How Local Government might help?



# 1. Introduction

- Complex issue
- Huge amount written about it and hard to understand
- No easy answers
- I will try to be clear



# The necessity for clarity!



# First Introductory Point

1. Young people are almost a “different species of human being”
  - Recent research shows that frontal lobe development (good judgement etc) is not completed until early - 20s





# Remember: youth are always challenging.....!

“There are a number of children running about the streets of Dunedin ... without the control of parents. If the government does not take them in hand ... they will become ... members of a criminal class.”



# Youth are always challenging.....!

“There is a definite relationship between the increase in the number of children on the streets and the increase in juvenile crime.”

*First headline from the Otago Daily Times 1884; second in 1886*



# Youth are always challenging.....!

“ . . . would there were no age between ten and three and twenty or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting...”

*Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, Act 3, scene 3*



# Youth are always challenging.....!

“What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?”

*Plato, 4th Century BC*



# Youth are always challenging.....!

“We live in a decaying age. Young people no longer respect their parents. They are rude and impatient. They frequently inhabit taverns and have no self control.”

*Inscription, 6000 year-old Egyptian tomb*



# Second Introductory Point

- The four “legs” or “domains” of a young person’s life
- Helpful framework
- Vital in our understanding
- The four areas
  - Home
  - School
  - Friends/Peers
  - Community



**A different perspective.....**

## 2. The fundamental importance of understanding differences in youth offenders

- The “life-course” “persistent” offender
  - Small group (5% of youth offenders)
  - The unexploded human time-bombs
- The “adolescent onset” offender
  - The majority of youth offenders – 80% (?)
  - Usually only offend as teenagers
  - We can work with this group effectively in the community, usually without Youth Court intervention
- Different responses for each group will be required



# 3. Causes of Youth Offending: No Easy Answers

- Hard to pin point causes of youth offending generally
- Easier for individuals
- Even then, what specifically was the cause? Many factors usually exist together
- Which factors are causative – which are “co-related”
- Who really knows?
- Better to talk about risk and resiliency
- Risk – what we mean
- Resiliency – what we mean



# Risk factors for children under 13

1. Male gender
2. History of antisocial behaviour, behaviour problems, conduct disorder during childhood (lying stealing, bullying, non-compliance etc) including contact with the law and arrest before age 12
3. Use of tobacco, alcohol and/or other drugs, either weekly or more frequently, before age 12
4. Low self-control, impulsive, poor ability to stop and think before acting during childhood
5. Hyperactive, poor ability to pay attention during childhood



## Risk factors for children under 13 (cont)

6. Involved in fighting, aggression, acts of violence before age 12
7. Low family income during childhood
8. Neither parent had skilled work (that is, one or both are unemployed or in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs)
9. Neither parent left school with any qualifications
10. One or both parents has a history of antisocial criminal behaviour



## 4. The Big Issues for Youth Justice from a Local Government Perspective

- Common themes among young offenders occur, and are difficult to ignore
- Here, I highlight those of most interest to Local Government



# 1. Family and Family Dysfunction



## 2. Alcohol and Cannabis Abuse



# 3. School Participation



## 4. Community “Connectedness”

***“A kid in sport stays out of Court”***

sign outside Blenheim airport

- A young person involved in sport, or any organised, positive community activity, stays out of Youth Court
- A very protective factor - builds resilience: good friends, good role models, good discipline, fulfilment and success



## 5. How might Local Government Respond?



# 5. How might Local Government Respond?

## Solutions for Young Offenders

- Take strategic advice from local Youth Offending Teams (YOTS)
- Develop strong relationships with Police Youth Aid
- Develop strong relationships with CYFS Youth Justice Managers and Family Group Conference Co-ordinators
- Develop venues for community work and community work supervision
- Support community remand facilities
- Supervision with activity programmes



# 5. How might Local Government Respond?

## Measures to Prevent Youth Offending

- Support the delivery of targeted home visitation programmes
- Work with troubled 7 – 11 year olds
- Get tough on the availability and the use of alcohol by young people
- Support campaigns and programmes against family violence
- Support or initiate District Truancy Programmes
- Support mentoring programmes
- Promote community connectedness



# Conclusion

“There is hope. More than ever before, we know what to do to reduce offending by young people. We know more about how to spend taxpayer dollars wisely to protect the public and reduce the likelihood of serious, violent crime by young offenders than at any other time in the history of society. We also know more about how to build on young people’s strengths and address their weak areas so that they are less likely to offend than ever before.”

*Kaye McLaren – “Tough is Not Enough”*



