



Justice and Love – Addressing Youth Crime

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“The whole trouble is that people think there are circumstances when one may deal with human beings without love, but no such circumstances ever exist. Human beings cannot be handled without love.”

Leo Tolstoy on the criminal justice system.

The Gospels identify God’s love with God’s justice. This inextricable connection guards against rationalising the treatment of some people as objects rather than human beings in the name of “justice”. Such “justice” becomes a dehumanising power-struggle with winners and losers.

Holding love and justice together also guards against treating justice as an abstraction, separate from its role as a relationship-building, life-sustaining force. The concern for justice is people, much more than “fairness,” “liberty,” or “entitlements.” Gospel justice focuses on right relationships, not right rules.

Christian justice, thus, is primarily corrective or restorative. Justice seeks reconciliation and reparation. Injustice must be opposed and resisted—but only in ways that hold open the possibility of reconciliation. What happens to the offenders matters, too, if justice is the goal.

Victorian Government Tough on Youth Crime

Responding to a relentless campaign by *The Herald Sun*, the Victorian Government has increasingly pursued measures seen as mercilessly harsh on teenagers who break the law. In March, the Government proudly proclaimed that there had been a 33% increase in bail refusals to children before the Children’s Court. These measures generally reduce community safety by driving up re-offence rates rather than addressing the causes of crime.

Positive Steps Taken by the Victorian Government

The Victorian Government has taken a positive step in the May 2026 state budget, providing \$30 million to the Violence Reduction Unit. Scotland and London have Violence Reduction Units that have reduced violent crime. In Scotland, the Violence Reduction Unit's work has resulted in no one under 18 being in prison. The murder rate reduced from 137 annually in the early 2000’s to 57 in 2025. The Victorian Violence Reduction Unit will pursue new programs that identify and disrupt youth crime patterns early.

The May budget also increased spending on one-on-one mentoring for children and youth at risk of contact with the criminal justice system by \$9.5 million. The mentoring programs address issues of school disengagement, isolation and limited access to positive role models.

There was \$8.1 million in the May budget to support the Ngarra Jarranounith Place Residential Diversion Program and Aboriginal Community Justice Panels to reduce the over-representation of First Peoples in the criminal justice system.

Offending by boys under 18 has fallen. Burglary, robbery, sexual offences and family violence offences are declining.

What works to reduce youth violent crime

Emeritus Professor Ross Homel has pointed out that the small group of teenagers responsible for serious violent offences are much more likely to have suffered serious trauma while growing up, including adverse childhood events such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse, all kinds of neglect and lack of supervision, household substance abuse or mental illness, and having a parent in prison. Research shows that incarceration largely re-traumatizes these youth. Short sentences can turn an offender’s life upside down. They can lose their job, home and social network and rarely become a better person after a stay in prison. Curbing youth



offending requires increased investment in youth-oriented family violence support and appropriate, flexible support for victims of criminal exploitation.

To turn the lives of serious repeat offenders around and truly make communities safer, we have to address the causes of their offending. Getting serious about stopping serious repeat youth offenders means helping them to develop psychosocial maturity. That means helping them develop skills to control their impulses, weigh the consequences of their actions, consider others' perspectives, delay gratification, and resist peer pressure. Youth incarceration impedes young people's ability to mature psychologically and participate in mainstream society.

Diverting children showing problematic behaviours from the criminal justice system can prevent a lifetime of needless suffering and community trauma.

In Sunshine, west Melbourne, police are working with the community legal centre Westjustice to identify youth who would benefit from a caution, diversion, or referral to external legal and non-legal support services. These include housing and employment providers, as well as substance and mental health counsellors. Police say that since the program began two years ago, youth crime rates in Brimbank and Wyndham have declined. The rate of youth being issued cautions by police has increased from 8% before the program to 70%.

The Netherlands has seen a 40% drop in its prison population over the last 20 years, along with a significant decline in violent crime. The reason is that Dutch courts are more inclined to give community service or suspended sentences, which reduces the likelihood of reoffending.

For further evidence about programs that work to reduce youth crime, you can download the report by the Australian Human Rights Commission, "Evidence-based approaches to child justice", October 2025, which can be downloaded from humanrights.gov.au

What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters or emails to:

The Hon Anthony Carbines
Minister for Community Safety
GPO Box 4356
Melbourne VIC 3000

The Hon Paul Hamer
Minister for Youth Justice
121 Exhibition Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

Salutation: Dear Minister

Salutation: Dear Minister

E-mail: minister.carbines@justice.vic.gov.au E-mail: Minister.Hamer@justice.vic.gov.au

Points to make in your letters or e-mails:

- Welcome the Victorian Government's commitment to the Violence Reduction Unit. However, express concern that the Government's pursuit of harsh measures against children who break the law will reduce community safety.
- Urge the Victorian Government to place greater emphasis on addressing the causes of youth crime.
- Ask that the Victorian Government:
 - Resources and expands the availability of evidence-based diversionary programs for children, including those by First People Community-Controlled Organisations;
 - Increases investment in restorative justice conferencing, ensuring culturally appropriate approaches for First Peoples' children and communities; and,
 - Increases investment in youth-oriented family violence support and appropriate, flexible support for children and youth victims of criminal exploitation.

Please send any replies to your letters to jim@victas.uca.org.au