The big question: How should young people be treated by the justice system?

Two factors led to media debate about youth justice in 2016 and into 2017: 1) Four Corners, an ABC investigative current affairs program, aired an episode in which guards at the Don Vale Youth Detention Centre in Northern Territory were filmed torturing inmates; 2) There were dramatic riots at both Parkville Youth Detention Centre and Malsbury Youth Detention Centre in Victoria.

Debate has centred around the conditions under which young people are kept in youth detention. In the case of the Don Vale Detention Centre in NT, there is a clear consensus that conditions for the young people in the facility have been barbaric and it needs to change. However, in terms of debate about the Victorian youth justice centres, there is no such agreement.

For some commentators, the riots in youth detention centres were evidence that young people are treated too leniently by the system and we need to have a “tougher” approach to keep young people in line.

Other people who contributed to the debate argued that the riots were symptomatic of a broken system where young people aren’t rehabilitated but initiated into a life of crime.

Quick facts:
- The Parkville Youth Justice Centre incarcerates 15-17 year old offenders who are too young to be in adult jails. It holds up to 84 people.
- There were three riots at the centre over the second half of 2016 which caused damage at the facility.
- Because of damage to the facility that needed to be repaired, the Victorian Government moved several inmates at the centre to Barwon Prison, an adult jail, where it’s claimed they’ve been victims of inhumane treatment.
- Malsbury Youth Detention Centre holds 18-21 year olds who are deemed too vulnerable for the adult justice system.
- In January, 30 inmates rioted at the centre, and 15 subsequently escaped, committing a series of crimes over the next day until they were recaptured.
Arguments that... being ‘tougher’ is not the solution to youth justice problems

- The problems in the youth justice system arise from a number of areas: poor infrastructure, poor training of staff, lack of education of inmates etc...We need to systematically address all of these to create a solution.

- Young people are rioting because they feel alienated and angry. Further isolating them with harsh punishments will just push them into becoming angry adults who are likely to reoffend.

- Our justice system should be based on the principles of rehabilitation - especially for young people. A harsh crime and punishment approach won’t prevent more crime.

Snap perspectives

There’s a range of problems

What that means is we’ve got a system full of people who have a lot of uncertainty. They don’t know how long they’re going to be there – a day, a week, 8 months. And until recently, because of that they were ineligible for programs, so they were basically bored.

And then along with that – yes, physical infrastructure does need to be addressed and improved – but we would say the main thing is that we need to improve or reinstate a more relationship-based approach and definitely that needs improving. Whereby, young people will have a better environment and they are fully occupied with programs that address the underlying causes of some of the trouble they are in – like literacy and numeracy – but also focus on criminal offending behaviour.

But we don’t have the model, or the appropriately qualified staff, within that model. So because it has been running down, and because it has been getting more unsafe for people, there’s been a problem with retaining staff. For example, we’re averaging about 40 percent agency staff. They don’t know the young people. They’re not qualified to do the work.

So it’s a bit of a toxic cocktail of problems.

Julie Edwards, Jesuit Social Services CEO

We need to be tough on crime

IT’S time for the Victorian Government to extract the digit and toughen the hell up on youth crime.

And I’m not talking about more police either, though God knows we could do with a few more of those as well.

No, it’s about putting a stop to the revolving door of youth justice by doing something completely different, like taking a strong and decisive approach to putting the brakes on skyrocketing juvenile crime.

The problems facing Victorians at present are not the result of a police shortage but the legacy of successive state governments that have allowed the steady watering down of the juvenile justice system to the point that it has become virtually ineffectual.

Just ask the young crooks as they leave the court punching the air in celebration and boasting to anyone who will listen how they got away with it again.

Karen Matthews, Geelong Advertiser

Arguments that... we need a tougher youth detention system

- Why should offenders be rewarded for doing the wrong thing with luxury cells and free education while people who do the right thing are struggling to pay for schools and houses?

Offenders should be punished.

- Young people are rioting because the system is too easy and lax. We need to make it stricter.

- The escapes from Malmsbury Youth Detention Centre shows that the public is at serious risk from out of control young offenders. Security needs to be tightened in order to increase public safety.