The prison pipeline: Why early intervention is the best solution

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'This report puts forward the view that potentially the most effective way to reduce serious crime rates in the longer term – and hence to reduce the use of imprisonment – is to take a life-course approach to crime prevention. This involves putting in place a planned and co-ordinated series of progressively more powerful barriers to progress along the trajectory to serious adult offending. An effective prevention programme would have to link up policy and practice in [child development, child health], social services, education, youth justice and adult justice.' (About Time, 2001:26)
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'About Time' was a cross justice sector report written in New Zealand over 20 years ago. As happens in government ministries across the globe, reports are written by people who are well-meaning and who want to make a change to people's lives. Yet, too often, such reports get shelved as their recommendations are put into the 'too hard' basket and/or governments change and 'tough on crime' policies, such as longer prison sentences and boot camps, get rolled out again to appease the fears of communities. Reports are fine but not if they end up gathering dust as the reality of implementing them becomes apparent. I have previously noted that implementation should start with the needs of children and families; we have to work out how to meet these needs, guided by research and real-world experience. New Zealand and many other countries are poorly served in this regard - there is little implementation science. It is complicated to persuade systems and services, which are currently measured by discrete outputs, to work together to meet families' needs by ensuring sustained leadership, getting staff trained and supporting them to work well across different sectors and diverse communities (Lambie, 2018a).

As a consequence, current policies do little to increase safety; rather, they increase the risk of offending from an early age and make our communities more unsafe, while costing billions of dollars of tax payers' money.

So how can we address these serious issues? What can we do to bring about change in our local communities and beyond? In this paper, I discuss the research evidence on the importance of early intervention in tackling the 'prison pipeline'. I then aim to translate the evidence into tangible things that can be done to improve life outcomes for the most vulnerable in our societies - those with complex personal histories of abuse and neglect involving violence, poverty, colonisation, racism, criminality in the family, mental health and/or addiction issues, educational problems and anti-social behaviour, and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of trauma. All these systemic and structural disadvantages contribute to the prison pipeline from pre-school to adolescence and adulthood. Finally, I discuss the importance of coherent and committed government policy in initiating and guiding change in our communities.

INTRODUCTION

We are all too well aware that crime has a negative impact on society. The victims of crime experience its impact for years and may transmit their trauma to subsequent generations. Society's principal weapon to combat crime is imprisonment - yet the overwhelming evidence is that prisons are extremely expensive training grounds for gangs, intimidation and further offending.

From an economic perspective, it has been argued that prisons are predominantly a waste of public resources and may be cost-effective only for the most serious and violent offenders (Marsh & Hedderman, 2009). They are likely to foster the criminal careers of those incarcerated by teaching them more criminal skills, damaging their employment, accommodation and family prospects, and compounding mental health and substance use issues. On release, even after a short period of imprisonment such as remand, offenders tend to reintegrate poorly into the community. Further offending does nothing to reassure victims of crime that the risk of harm is being effectively managed by the justice system. This is not to denigrate the great work

that many prison personnel do 'inside' the wire. Thousands try on a daily basis to help change the lives of those in the justice system. However, the evidence is that what they do is too little and far too late. It would be much more effective to intervene a great deal earlier.

Evidence indicates that internationally, the increasing number of those in prison has been driven largely by 'tough on crime' policies from governments on both sides of the political divide. Such policies are favoured by small but vocal interest groups who push for harsher punishments and longer sentences. Tough on crime dogma is widely known as 'penal populism' where politicians promise vote-winning, overly simplistic solutions for a narrow set of carefully chosen law-and-order problems (Pratt & Clark, 2005). As well as in New Zealand and Australia, this phenomenon has also been seen in the United States (Enns, 2014) and in the United Kingdom (Jennings et al., 2017). Knee jerk policies that lack any evidence-base have resulted in an increased financial burden for the tax payer with no increase in the public's sense of safety.

Despite the good intentions of many who work in the criminal justice field, the partners and children of offenders (who are typically the offenders' victims) are inadequately supported by other government ministries to recover from the years of offending, trauma and violence that have preceded the imprisonment (Miller & Alexander, 2015). Children whose parents/primary caregivers are incarcerated have been found to be more at risk of poverty and social deprivation, and of engaging in crime themselves (Davis & Shlafer, 2017). They do not learn how to build good relationships with their own partners, children and wider society, and their employment prospects are significantly diminished (Visher et al., 2017) so that the intergenerational impacts of parents involved in the justice system are very apparent. The key is to provide support and interventions to the children of parents inside the criminal justice system.

WHY IS EARLY INTERVENTION SO IMPORTANT? MAKING A DIFFERENCE: DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS TO THE PRISON PIPELINE

A large body of scientific evidence concerns the impact of life-course factors on youth offending and highlights the importance of focusing on early developmental life course stages and intergenerational interventions if we are to truly address the prison pipeline. Family and extended family are at the heart of a child's world and need to be nurtured to help every child flourish. Effective interventions address cultural, psychosocial, educational and environmental factors that have a proven impact on the pathway to offending. Scientific evidence clearly indicates that severely challenging behaviour in a child's earliest years may develop into lifelong offending.

INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACTS

It is now widely recognised that maltreatment in childhood is related to subsequent violent offending (Malvaso et al., 2017). Child maltreatment in one generation is directly correlated to the victims, as adults, engaging in maltreatment of the next generation (Schofield et al., 2013; Conger et al., 2009). Such a relationship is likely to have both biological and environmental components. The stress-induced changes in the brain of the first generation affect their level of emotional self-control, resulting in being more likely to 'flip one's lid' and act impulsively - behaviours which are passed onto the next generation. Individuals who have experienced ongoing maltreatment in more than one form are more likely to engage in offending behaviour (Hurren et al., 2017). Youth who experience out-of-home care are more likely to offend in adulthood (Yang et al., 2017), illustrating the importance of stable home placements within the wider family context, wherever possible.

TACKLING THE PRISON PIPELINE: KEY MESSAGES

1. Prevention of child abuse and maltreatment is possible

Early home visitation has been found to reduce child abuse in high-risk families. Programmes that start very early in the life course during pregnancy, and continue for up to two years, comprising weekly visits and focused interventions, have been found to be effective. Sustained home visitation has been found to impact positively on mother-infant interaction, maternal mood and maternal employment potential, as well as on the cognitive development and externalising behaviours of children (Levey et al., 2017).

2. Early intervention is more cost-effective

It has been well documented that investing in early intervention and prevention programmes is effective in significantly reducing criminal justice costs downstream; that is, it is more cost-effective than imprisoning people and mass incarceration (Welsh et al., 2015). Therapeutic programmes targeting the highest-risk populations are most cost-effective when they occur early in the life course, are holistic and adopt a developmental crime prevention strategy (Welsh et al., 2015; Welsh & Farrington, 2007).

Early intervention, home-based programmes such as the Nurse-Family Partnership (Eckenrode et al., 2017) have been estimated to reduce murder rates by one-third and save billions per year in imprisonment and associated costs (Ebel et al., 2011). Longitudinal studies of programmes such as the Perry Preschool Programme in the United States have reported a 65% cost saving due to a reduction in offending. At age 27 years,

TEN WAYS TO INTERVENE ON THE ENTRY PATHWAYS INTO THE PRISON PIPELINE
(ADAPTED FROM LAMBIE, 2018: 8-9)

1. Break the intergenerational cycle	*Maltreatment in one generation is positively related to maltreatment in the next (about 80% of child and youth offenders grew up with family violence at home). Children with a parent in prison are 10 times more likely to be imprisoned in future than are non-prisoners' kids.* Provide parenting programmes in prison help break the cycle. Support maternal mental health before, during and after pregnancy.
2. Support families of infants 0 to 2 years	Support 0- to 2-year-olds and their parents, such as with home visitation programmes for high-risk families. Provide help with caregiver mental health and substance-use disorders. Build neighbourhood and community resources (such as quality childcare).
3. Tackle childhood adversity	Address key elements of childhood adversity (poverty, domestic violence and child abuse). Address child mental health problems to improve behaviour and ultimately adult outcomes.
4. Address severely challenging behaviour	*Severely challenging behaviour is evident in around 10% of pre-schoolers and young children, and predicts negative outcomes later in life, including offending.* Put in place effective programmes as early as possible for children with challenging behaviour.
5. Offer effective parent education programmes for parents of children under 10	Provide evidence-based parent education programmes to promote positive parent-child interactions, parental consistency and effective responses to difficult behaviours.
6. Establish early childhood centres	Establish early childhood centres where staff can help with self-regulation, social and verbal skills, caregiver warmth and behaviour management strategies.
7. Support schools to make a vital contribution	*Schools provide social and emotional learning (SEL) for all students and targeted assistance for those with problem behaviours. Entry into primary school is often the first time problem behaviours come to light. Keeping children in school reduces risks of future crime and incarceration.* Ensure schools are well-resourced to manage children who are most in need, including those with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, developmental disorders, ADHD, mental health issues, and speech and language difficulties.
8. Intervene with aggressive children, child and adolescent offenders	*A small group of offenders engage in crime from childhood onwards ('life-course-persistent' offenders), while the majority of antisocial offending is 'adolescent-limited'.* Intervene for all aggressive children, child offenders (10-13 years) and delinquent youth, to prevent potentially lifelong negative outcomes.
9. Find 'family' alternatives to gangs	*Some young people in youth-justice institutions find a 'family' through gang affiliation and move with the group onto more offending and adult prison where they then need the gang to look out for them. Almost half of prisoners aged 20 and under are gang members.* Intervene early to prevent the pathway 'from care to custody' and promote prosocial relationships, cultural and community engagement and belonging as a counter-force to gangs. Find positive options for youth (e.g., sport, cultural groups) to support children and youths to find another 'family' to assist their growth and development.
10. Provide multi-level, therapeutic interventions	Interventions work best where all aspects of a child's life are addressed - physical, mental, cultural, school, peer and family relationships. Provide well-planned, well-implemented and carefully evaluated, intensive, home-based programmes to care for families. Target individual, family, peer, school and community elements that underlie or contribute to problematic behaviour.

there was a $7 saving for every $1 spent in the pre-school years, whilst at age 40 years, there was a $16.14 saving for every dollar spent in the pre-school years (Schweinhart et al., 1993). Similar savings have been found in the SNAP programme (a parent/child intervention for children aged 6-11 years with conduct problems in Canada) (Farrington & Koegl, 2015).

The economic benefits of prevention programmes go well beyond reducing criminal-justice costs. Savings extend to reduced use of healthcare and social services, less need for specialist education services, and increased employment (Welsh et al., 2015). The Washington State Institute of Public Policy which is widely known for its evaluation and cost benefit analyses has widely reported the benefits of funding prevention programmes and this research has been used to support the development of more progressive criminal justice programmes in some US states, as well as in the United Kingdom (Aos, 2011).

HOW TO PREVENT ENTRY TO THE PRISON PIPELINE

Cost-benefit ratios clearly support the argument for early intervention programmes as key in persuading governments to adopt evidence-based criminal justice early intervention policies to prevent downstream human and economic costs (Welsh & Farrington, 2015; Vanlandingham & Drake, 2012). However, there are no quick-fix solutions to the problems facing justice systems globally. What we need are medium to long-term changes so as to redirect the pathways that can lead from childhood offending to adult imprisonment and on to the next generation. There is good international and local evidence that action with children and young people (up to age 25 years) can make a real difference - that 'developmental crime prevention' works.

We need to think about what sort of future we want to create for the generations to come. Is it one with a rising prison population, at ever higher costs, without corresponding community, victim or offender benefits? Is it one with long-term indigenous and ethnic minorities being over-represented in the criminal-justice system? Is it one where children are increasingly both victims and offenders?

Yet any efforts to intervene early and to think creatively and in the long-term about offending and offenders inevitably encounter strongly held views about the importance of punishment and the need for community protection; beliefs about individual vs. shared responsibility for social ills, and about the roles of poverty, inequality, and vulnerability in shaping children's life trajectories. It will always require strong and courageous leadership to commit to and implement programmes that produce sustained positive change across the justice system.

The table summaries just a few of the ways in which this might be done.

CONCLUSION

This paper has documented the overwhelming body of scientific evidence that argues strongly for the need for early intervention and proposes the many opportunities that exist to intervene.

Governments need to devise cross-party strategies in their attempts to block the prison pipeline from childhood to adulthood. Action plans must be co-created with and agreed by communities who have been invited to be equal partners with government. A holistic approach is needed to strengthen vulnerable families in the areas of parenting, health and education – with all interventions operating within an appropriate cultural framework.

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AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFLECTION

In order to help readers meet their CPD requirements, every issue of the IJBPE offers a reflective tool or series of reflective questions to support close examination of a selected article, or articles, or the whole issue. These prompts for reflection can be used either by individual readers or by groups of colleagues, and provide a structure that enables you to get the most out of what you have read.
The aim is to help you apply ideas that you have gained from reading the issue to your individual practice and to the overall service that you provide for parents.

You might like to focus your thinking about one article in this issue in the following way:

START: Which article are you choosing?
SUMMARISE: Try and summarise the key points in the article either verbally or in writing.
REFLECT: Why have you chosen this article? What aspects of your personal or professional experience does it speak to? How does it make you feel?
APPLY: How will this article affect your relationship with particular patients/clients/families? How might it affect the service of which you are part? Who could you share it with?

What's in the next issue

FOCUS ON: ISSUES OFTEN OVERLOOKED: SURROGACY, EARLY MISCARRIAGE, FATHERS' NEEDS, CHILDCARE AND DIFFERENT WAYS OF PARENTING

- Supporting the surrogate mother and the intended parents
- The under-recognised trauma of first trimester miscarriage
- A midwife's reflection on four decades of labour care
- What fathers say they need to know during pregnancy and after
- Does early placement in childcare affect infants' cognitive development?
- Forest School and nature pedagogy
- Parenting across cultures