Behaviours and Service Responses

Supporting high-risk young people

Youth Justice Young People – Understanding High Risk of Reoffending

This fact sheet aims to provide information about the required skills, behaviours, policies and procedures for service providers working with young people who have a high-risk of reoffending.

Youth Justice Queensland uses the Youth Level of Service Case Management Inventory 2.0 to assess reoffending risk of young people. This is a widely used tool that has been validated across countries and cohorts, including in Australia and with First Nations young people[1].

There are other types of risk that young people might present with, such as risk of mental health issues and related self-harm behaviours and/or risk of acting unsafely or getting involved in incidents (that are not offences). These are also important to understand, consider and plan for when working with young people, but are different to risk of reoffending.
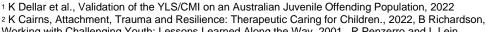
Many of the young people who are assessed as high or very risk of reoffending also have a lot of other complex needs that may not be being met in their lives. Below we outline some of these, as it is also important to understand, consider and plan for these needs in designing and delivering programs or services that are targeted towards high-risk young offenders.

Unconditional commitment and persistent engagement is central to effective responses to 'high-risk' young people To respond to needs and behaviours that stem from loss and trauma and related mistrust, building a trust-based relationship an sense of security are essential. Research is clear–unconditional commitment is required if the most severely damaged young people, those with the most destructive behaviours, are to be supported to heal, grow and change their behaviour[2].

What are the key demographics of young people who are high risk of reoffending?

On an average day, of the young people who are high risk of reoffending:

- Mostly 15–17 years of age, with an emerging cohort of 10–13 years of age.
- Mostly young men within emerging proportion of young women.
- First Nations young people are over-represented as well as some Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups, such as Pasifika young people and increasingly African young people, both mainly in South East Queensland.
- Some may have experienced time in custody.
- Some are parents.
- Many experience multiple and complex needs, such as neuro-impairment, learning and speech and language difficulties, histories of trauma and/or experiencing domestic and family violence, resulting in post-traumatic stress disorders and other behaviours, and substance use and some may potentially have substance addictions and other unmet health needs, including often undiagnosed hearing and eyesight challenges.
- The strengths of these young people are often they are resilient, have excellent survival skills and some have good peer leadership qualities, which can be channelled in prosocial ways.

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[1] K Dellar et al., Validation of the YLS/CMI on an Australian Juvenile Offending Population, 2022
[2] K Cairns, Attachment, Trauma and Resilience: Therapeutic Caring for Children., 2022, B Richardson, Working with Challenging Youth: Lessons Learned Along the Way, 2001., R Penzerro and L Lein, Burning Their Bridges: Disordered Attachment and Foster Care Discharge., 1995

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What are the behavioural indicators of young people at high risk of offending?

- Distrust in or guarded towards adults or those in authority and rejecting the offer of help and support.
- Not used to being supervised by a parent, authorities and/or school.
- Can have long term disengagement from community, services, school (including truancy, suspension, expulsion) and therefore young person may not be used to and/or have skills for engaging in regular structured programs or services.
- Displaying suicidal intent, self-injurious behaviours or self-harm.
- Sense of self at extreme ends of the continuum from very low self-esteem to perfectionism.
- Threatening or willingness to use violence and/or aggression including carrying of weapons, verbal threats, or both.
- Use of social media for bullying, pranks and self-injury, sexting, promotion of high-risk behaviours etc.
- Deficits in comprehension, communication skills and/or social learning cues.
- Lacking empathy for others and emotional dysregulation including impulse control.
- Cognitive deficits particularly in memory, problem-solving, sequencing of tasks and assessing future consequences, paying attention, etc.
- Sensory deficits in hearing, speech and/or language.
- Substance use and/or abuse increasing with poly-substance use and addiction.
- Chronic or persistent mental health issues.
- Limited connections to extended family, school communities, or local communities.
- Behaviours may escalate when in a group, peer influence can have a strong effect on behaviour, particularly where other young people who are at high risk are present.

What can be the situational factors and life circumstances of high-risk young people?

- Intergenerational offending and parental incarceration.
- Grief and loss, from significant major event, or cumulative over many/frequent loss and grief experiences, which can be high particularly for First Nations young people.
- Socio-economic disadvantage including homelessness, overcrowded housing or unstable and/or unsafe accommodation arrangements.
- Childhood maltreatment including experiences of physical, psychological and emotional harm, and abuse and neglect.
- Refugee or displacement backgrounds.
- Family violence and/or excessive discipline.
- Parental substance use, abuse or addiction.
- Family member with chronic health issues, including mental health issues.
- Parental separation or divorce.
- Sexual abuse and/or being exploited in relation to engaging in offending.
- Traumatic injury, disability, or health or chronic health issues of the young person.
- Low level of literacy and numeracy.
- Peer group dynamics and relationships (including social media links and networks) such as gang involvement and inappropriate non-peer aged relationships.

What is expected of service providers working with high-risk young people?

- **Overarching frameworks**
  - [Trauma-informed approaches](#)[3] - sensitive to historical impacts of adverse childhood experiences, emphasising physical, psychological and emotional safety.
  - [Culturally informed and culturally respectful responses.](#)
  - Working in partnership to share risk, understanding sharing of information.

- **Values and behaviours**
  - Resilience and understanding that engagement with and change in young people's behaviours is a continuing, iterative and lengthy process.
  - Be patient to allow trust to develop naturally.
  - Be agile to change and highly dynamic situations.
  - Be present and available.
  - Work with authenticity, truth and integrity.
  - Self-awareness of beliefs, values, judgements, and power.
  - Hold appropriate professional boundaries with young people.
  - Expect to be tested and foresee challenges throughout the process.
  - Understand child rights and different developmental abilities of children at different ages.

- **Communication skills**
  - Youth-friendly language, consistent messaging and instructions/rules.
  - De-escalation skills.
  - Conflict resolution and conflict management.
  - Motivational interviewing skills.
  - Sound judgement.

- **Managing groups**
  - Constant supervision of behaviour, group dynamics and activities – monitoring group behaviours, interaction, body language, etc.
  - Clear and evidence-based intent behind all engagement and activities – planning and structure is required for this cohort.

- **Governance**
  - Risk management and mitigation – documented and regularly revised.
  - Recording and monitoring of data to reflect service delivery and outcomes.
  - Reflective practice to continuously learn and improve processes.
  - Staff training, supervision and support.

Resources

- Working Together Changing the Story: Youth Justice Strategy 2019–23 (https://desbt.qld.gov.au/youth-justice/reform/strategy)
- Youth Justice Strategy Evidence (what works, what doesn't work and other useful reports) - [Youth Justice Strategy evidence | Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training (desbt.qld.gov.au)](#)

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[3] C Kezelman and P Stavropoulos, The Last Frontier' – Practice Guidelines for Treatment of Complex Trauma and Trauma Informed Care and Service Delivery, 2012

- Youth Justice Service Map - Map of Youth Justice services in Queensland (desbt.qld.gov.au)
- Youth Level of Service Case Management Inventory 2.0 - Validation of the YLS/CMI on an Australian Juvenile Offending Population - PubMed (nih.gov)

- **Trauma-Informed Practice**
  - Australian Human Rights Commission - Guidelines for Working With a Trauma-informed Approach
  - Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children - Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children (resource sheet; 8 January 2014 edition)(AIHW)
  - Trauma, young people and Juvenile Justice - Trauma and juvenile justice in Australia.pdf (anu.edu.au)

- **Cultural Responsiveness**
  - Youth Justice Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people | Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training (desbt.qld.gov.au)
  - The Healing Foundation – Healing Portal Healing Portal | The Healing Foundation
  - Dr Tracy Westerman - IPS Home - Indigenous Psychological Services (indigenouspsychservices.com.au)