

Professor Ross Homel: Early intervention is the key to keeping kids out of the criminal justice system



Almost four decades ago Professor Ross Homel, AO helped shape the debate and persuade policy makers on the introduction of mass random breath testing in NSW and in other states—a system that has saved thousands of lives. But it is his latest research that is set to have the biggest effect on society.

The former Commissioner of the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission is a leading researcher into the underlying causes of crime, its links with other social problems, and the effectiveness of early intervention and prevention programs.

It's the desire to give children, especially disadvantaged children, improved wellbeing and better life chances that fuels Professor Homel's passion.

His aim is simple—foster better outcomes for disadvantaged children by tackling the root causes of behavioural issues that, when left unchecked, often lead to crime, poor outcomes in mental and general health, unemployment, and lower life expectancy.

The solution, however, is complex. In fact it has taken many years for governments and politicians to be persuaded to recognise that prevention, rather than punishment, holds the key to reducing crime levels and improving society as a whole.

Talk of mega prisons sends a shudder through Professor Homel. He hopes that his ongoing research can contribute to fundamental shifts in social policy as well as the allocation of social resources to provide a better chance for all.

"In crime policy, there is an enormous emphasis on punishment and imprisonment that is not based on evidence," said Professor Homel,

"The problem with law and order politics is it's very easy to be able to sway public opinion.

"A big problem at the moment is the gap between 'science and service' – between what is known about what works and what is actually done in practice.

"Prisons, in design and practice, punish and exclude from mainstream society some of the most vulnerable and damaged groups.

"There is a fair bit of evidence that both adult and juvenile prisons just make things worse, not better.

"I don't think many people realise how many young people, when they are released from detention, die either through suicide or illness, or accidents, or have very poor outcomes if they stay alive.

"It's a pretty horrible part of life for these very disadvantaged, usually abused children.

"Fortunately we have moved beyond that. The politicians, or at least the government departments, have come good. They are all very committed to evidence-based practice and measuring outcomes."

Pathways to Prevention

One crime prevention initiative Professor Homel has helped develop is Pathways to Prevention. It is a holistic project developed in partnership with Griffith University researchers as well as the national community agency, Mission Australia, and local schools and communities and supported by funding from corporate and philanthropic sponsors, the Queensland Government, and the Australian Research Council.

This longitudinal study is the first of its type in Australia. It is providing a detailed understanding of the impact of 'routinely delivered' early developmental services on child outcomes—research that is currently sorely missing.

"We are looking at the impact of family support on child outcomes and there is almost no literature anywhere in the world on the effects of such services as they are offered day in, day out, in disadvantaged communities. What we know is almost entirely based on sophisticated interventions designed by researchers, not what is routinely offered in Australia's most disadvantaged regions. It's quite a challenging topic," says Professor Homel, who is Foundation Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University.

The Pathways Project began collecting information on children in 2001 and amassed pre- and post-intervention data on thousands of students from seven state schools in a Brisbane region. Participation in Pathways was always entirely voluntary.

The area was chosen as it is the third most disadvantaged Statistical Local Area in Queensland. A Census snapshot shows:

2001 Census Data	Pathways test region	Brisbane
Children aged 0-9 years	20.8%	13.8%
Children aged 0-5 years	10.1%	8.1%
% single parent families	33.1%	15.7%
% public housing commission properties	39.1%	4.3%
% unemployed	20.0%	7.8%
% families below poverty line	40.7%	18.9%
Median weekly household income	\$400-499	\$800-899
% adult population who completed high school	23.6	43.2
% language other than English	32.3	10.1
% Indigenous	7.2	1.7
Rate of Court appearances in 1998 and 1999 (per 1000 10-16 year olds)	158	20

One of the most eagerly awaited data sets from the Pathways project is that which relates to crime, to see if the program has been successful in steering children away from criminal or antisocial activities.

"We have now followed up the early cohort of four to five-year-olds to see if they have a youth justice record," said Professor Homel.

"The Justice Department will do the matching of the names with Youth Justice records and then will provide the de-identified linked data. It will take a while."

The Pathways project has already won national awards and gained international recognition for its rigour and methodology.

"We know the evidence shows well implemented early prevention initiatives can have long-term impact. I'm not saying Pathways to Prevention has achieved that yet, but if you look at the best of the American work, they did achieve long-term outcomes working with young children maybe 20 to 30 years ago or longer.

"Those studies that have done long-term follow up have mostly been able to show a range of extremely positive outcomes for people in their teen years and early adulthood and beyond.

"There is plenty of evidence that it can be done. What we are doing right now with a whole range of partners, including the Federal Government, is putting the science into large-scale routine practices that attempt to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.

"We're hoping to strengthen the existing delivery systems. That's what we have been doing for the past three years through an ARC Linkage grant and we now have direct funding from the Department of Social Services (through their national Communities for Children Program) and from our state government partners. We hope to take it further next year and the year after."

Reducing problem and antisocial behaviour

The Pathways to Prevention project has already shown it can produce worthwhile reductions in problem behaviours in young children and strengthen the features of family context that facilitate positive child development.

It also can help lessen some of the effects of poverty by working with parents, community leaders and schools.

The key to turning around the lives of disadvantaged children is getting in early, with the support and resources that the child, parents, school and the community needs.

"I'm not saying everything we do is going to be massively effective but what I do know is we have a methodology, which if it is applied and improved over time then there is every chance we will improve outcomes for many disadvantaged kids," said Professor Homel.

Collaboration between schools, parents, family support services and community leaders is essential to ensure that all groups are working in tandem rather than in parallel efforts. That involves a range of partnerships with non-government organisations and schools.

He said governments and the whole community have a profound moral obligation to "look out" for all children and young people who, from time to time, encounter challenges far beyond the normal capacities of families to overcome.

"Community service agencies cannot, on their own, fill every gap," he said.

Professor Homel has been buoyed by the many new strengthened relationships that have developed during his research projects.

"I think one of the reasons we have gotten so much support from so many different partner organisations is that they are really keen to work with us on that problem," Professor Homel said.

"The outcome measures that we have worked on are an important part of what we've done but we are also building electronically the tools and resources to help partnerships of community agencies working in local communities to do their job better, through better scientific practice, by using evidence more effectively and by being more rigorous about the way they select the kinds of interventions that they implement so that they relate to agreed goals, the shared goals amongst a whole range of organisations, including schools."

Behavioural problems such as aggression and inattention by pre-school students are often a reflection of the home environment, he said.

"If say a four-year-old or five-year-old is behaving like that, there are reasons for it and they are to do with what has been going on in their family. These things don't happen in a vacuum," said Professor Homel.

"We want to bring the schools into the discussion in setting goals for children in a particular community because schools know a lot about kids."

Achievements and impact

The Pathways to Prevention model came as a result of research by the federally funded Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium – a group headed by Professor Homel in 1999 which drew on the interdisciplinary skills of criminologists, developmental psychologists, sociologists, and experts in social work and social policy.

The Federal Minister for Justice and Customs at the time, the Honourable Amanda Vanstone, noted the *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia report* "represents a significant contribution to our understanding of how we as a society can tackle crime".

Importantly, the report also provided a blueprint on how to translate the findings into policy areas as well as recommending a demonstration project to monitor and quantify its success.

Pathways is a model of practice in disadvantaged areas that is:

- Research-based and practice-informed
- Flexible, comprehensive, and persevering
- Effective
- Cost-effective
- Sustainable
- Replicable, and
- Can be brought to scale.

Information on almost 5000 students has been entered into the Pathways database to trace a range of home and school behaviours, levels of support and disadvantage. Participation in Pathways, which is always entirely voluntary, has been shown to be associated with a range of positive outcomes, including:

- Improved Grade 1 school performance
- Higher ratings of school readiness
- Higher levels of involvement in children's learning, reduced isolation among participating families, and better links to support services

- Greater confidence in parenting role among participants of family-based programs
- Greater involvement of parents in the school
- A growing perception by schools of Pathways community workers as key contributors in the school and their cultural communities.

Economic analysis also shows that Pathways is cost-effective in comparison with some more conventional remedial programs.

Influencing government policies and programs

Pathways shared first prize in the 2004 National Crime and Violence Prevention Awards. It has influenced a range of government policies both nationally and federally, including:

- The Communities for Children program
- The design of Learning for Life Centres (or Parent-Children Centres) in in four of the seven schools in the Inala Region.
- Mission Australia also replicated the pathways model in a number of other disadvantaged areas in Australia
- The Federal Government's Social Inclusion Advisory Board and Department of Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs also refer to the model and the Pathways research as a guide to how to work more effectively in disadvantaged communities.
- The CREATE-ing Pathways to Child Wellbeing program—designed to strengthen collaborative practices around clear, measurable goals that are achieved through evidence-based initiatives
- ARC project - [Creating the Conditions for Collective Impact: Transforming the Child-Serving System in Disadvantaged Communities](#)
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Professor Homel's work has also drawn national and international praise including international awards. He is a passionate advocate around the world for policies and practices that are based on firm scientific evidence and that improve individual and community wellbeing.

He brings a blend of research rigour holding a Masters in Mathematical Statistics, and a PhD in Behavioural Sciences.

It's the purity of his research, meticulous data collection, sound methodology and passion that has seen him described as 'national treasure' in the field of crime prevention and parenting programs, by former Crime and Misconduct Commission chair, Robert Needham.

He was shortlisted for the 2009 Australian of the Year for his work as well as being appointed an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AO) "for service to education, particularly in the field of criminology, through research into the causes of crime, early intervention and prevention methods".

Battling the stereotype

Professor Homel is no stranger to controversy. His work on the introduction of mass random breath testing in the early '80s greatly divided the community.

It was initially viewed by many as an assault on the Aussie way of life depriving the working man of a right to have drink after work and drive home.

It sparked public outrage and even led to local parliamentary members being banned by clubs and hotels.

However, for Professor Homel it was his faith in the statistics that showed a clear and compelling argument that the problem of drinking and driving had to be addressed, a view that never wavered even when faced with hostile community members.

Similarly, with youth crime the shock-jocks of radio and TV continue to whip up a storm of support for 'good-old fashioned' hidings to be meted out to 'juvenile offenders' – a return in discipline to the 'good old days'.

The problem, however, is it is neither good nor does it work. Locking juveniles up is something Professor Homel says does little in terms of rehabilitation.

"It's the evidence about 'what works' that is important," said Professor Homel.

"We want to publish more of our work and have a continuing impact on social policy in Australia and internationally.

"Through aiding the 'justice reinvestment' movement we hope to persuade governments to reduce funding for prisons and put more money into early prevention and other prevention programs."

The threat of doing nothing is what scares Professor Homel. Winning government support to put more money into early prevention is an uphill battle.

"There is no magic bullet. If we leave it as it is a few kids will survive and be very resilient regardless but a lot won't. A lot will go under.

"We run the risk of more kids, particularly from Aboriginal communities ending up in the equivalent of a [Don Dale Youth Detention Centre](#), heaven help us.

"It's not crash hot anywhere in Australia in youth detention. It's not just the Northern Territory that has these problems.

"So, keeping kids out of those sorts of environments in the first place is really the bottom line for me.

"That's why I have been doing all this work over the years. Long-term strategies for keeping kids out of these brutal and de-humanising and completely bloody useless systems."

Measuring children's wellbeing

One of the strengths of Professor Homel's work has been the scientific rigour he has applied to collecting and interpreting data.

His research with Pathways has targeted key transition points—the first days of going to pre-school, the change from primary to secondary school.

How well children are prepared and resourced for these life-changing events is paramount to helping them so that they don't feel overwhelmed and alone, Professor Homel said.

It's at that point where the pathways of risky behaviour, disconnectedness often flourish.

To gain a deeper understanding of a child's wellbeing a computer game called [Rumble's Quest](#) has been designed and developed by Dr Kate Freiberg, a developmental psychologist who has worked closely with Professor Homel for more than 15 years. Rumble's Quest is based firmly on research in developmental psychology, and aims to measure and promote the wellbeing of children and their families.

The game is designed for 5-12 year olds and has been used for thousands of children.

"We know they love playing it as we have some kids lining up wanting to play it again, but we discourage its use more than once or twice a year.

"Maybe twice a year for a school or an agency that is running some program and wants to use Rumble's Quest as an outcome measure.

"Our data suggests that within 12 months, quite often the case is that you see declines or improvements in their scores and this is related to what is going on in their life.

"It's not a score that is fixed once a child produces their wellbeing score and it just remains the same. It is greatly affected by what is going on in the child's life whether good things or bad things.

"So planned interventions can be shown to have positive impacts on this outcome and it doesn't take a lifetime for that to happen.

"We think it is a fairly robust tool in the 5 to 12-year-old age range."

Parents and home life – fertile ground for positive outcomes

One of the myths surrounding troubled children is that they have parents who don't care or don't love them. While many children come from extremely disadvantaged homes their parents are often struggling with a range of issues.

"Part of the response is to support families, to provide parent training or simple practical support for families so that they can do a better job in raising their kids," said Professor Homel.

"We start with the assumption that parents want to do the best they can for their kids but face a lot of barriers in achieving that.

"The number of parents who aren't interested in their kids is very, very few.

"Even those that are drug addicted or have mental health problems still desperately love their children and want the best outcomes for them. It's just human nature.

"[Professor Sharon Dawe's work](#) is a perfect example of what can be done to help really vulnerable parents. She is having great success with [Parents Under Pressure](#) assessing what the particular context is for this family's problems and working to resolve them while still drawing on the scientific research on best practice.

"Sharon's group and ours are very much in sync in terms of philosophy but we're focussed on more of a universal prevention platform, while she is focussed on those parents most under pressure, the extreme end of the risk spectrum where really intensive and special resources are required of the kind that she has developed."

From statistics and criminal justice to support agencies

Professor Homel's early interest in crime was sparked while he finished a Masters in Mathematical Statistics and worked with the NSW Bureau of Crime and Statistics Research.

His early mentors encouraged him to use science to promote community development, as well as a vision of how to help people flourish.

His research scope has included detailed reports and recommendations on violence in the streets, in homes, in licensed premises, in schools, in prisons and other institutions.

Many of his recommendations, including better street lighting, installation of CCTV systems, programs aimed at preventing violence and bullying in schools, prison violence and violence in Aboriginal communities have been adopted.

"I did a lot of work in my early years with police, particularly around alcohol-related violence and alcohol-related road accidents.

"I was one of the major proponents of mass random breath-testing in Australia ... that was the focus of my PhD back in the '80s.

"I've done a lot of work with the police over the years and certainly have had a lot of interaction with the [Department of Justice](#) here in Queensland, and the federal Attorney-General's Department and the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#).

"These days I spend much more of my time working with education departments, department of communities and human services and working with children and families to try and keep them out of those systems.

"I've moved away from direct involvement with the criminal justice system to an involvement with the agencies that actually are in a position to care for kids and help shape their pathways in a new direction.

"Dealing with 'root causes' is one way of explaining what we are trying do.

"It is not easy. But we have a lot more hope and more success these days with the tools available and the research that has been done around the world.

"Every year there is more and more research that points us in the right direction."

And that is something that gives us all reason for hope.

RESOURCES & LINKS

- [Rumble's Quest](#)
- [RealWell](#)
- [Creating Pathways to Prevention](#)
- [Griffith Criminology institute](#)

THE PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION PROJECT: KEY FACTS

- Pathways to Prevention operated between 2001 and 2011 in a disadvantaged region of Brisbane
- The focus now is on analysing data from the Pathways Child Outcomes Longitudinal Database (4800 children)
- Designed to aid disadvantaged children through early intervention in a bid to provide better lifetime outcomes
- Aimed to address anti-social behaviour and crime before it becomes entrenched
- Worked in conjunction with the local community, teachers, parents and welfare agencies, in particular Mission Australia
- Project was a National Crime and Violence Prevention Award winner in 2004
- The Pathways database is being extended to track, on a confidential, de-identified basis, the success of the program in preventing children from ending up in trouble with the youth justice system.
- Pathways evaluation included data on children who have been the subject of intervention methods as well as children who have received no extra assistance outside of what would normally be provided
- Is part of a longitudinal study that will trace the effectiveness of 'routinely delivered' family support and early developmental services

- Rumble's Quest, a computer game developed by Dr Kate Freiberg as a result of Pathways, is a tool widely used to measure child wellbeing
- Pathways model has been used as a guide to how to work more effectively in disadvantaged communities.
- Study was conducted in seven schools in the third most disadvantaged Statistical Local Area in Queensland.
- Participation results have shown improved behaviour in preschool and improved Grade 1 school performance, including higher ratings of school readiness
- For primary school-age children Pathways led to improved classroom behaviour, reduced impulsivity, and improved social and emotional confidence
- Has led to greater parent confidence in their role as a parent, greater involvement in schools, and reduced isolation among participating parents.