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Sector insights paper

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Queensland Ombudsman: 2024 Combined Inspection Report for Youth Detention Centres

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

OVER-REPRESENTATION

The Queensland Inspector of Detention Services has published the combined report of the 2024 inspections of three Queensland youth detention centres (YDCs) – West Moreton, Brisbane and Cleveland. The report focused on four key areas of concern, finding that systemic strain is a primary driver of significant operational failures and risks the humane treatment of detained children. The report reviewed data collected in periods between 1 December 2022 and 31 July 2024, and information collected during on-site inspections that occurred during a number of times between 26 February 2024 and 9 November 2024.

Systemic pressure and high utilisation rates

The operational strain of Queensland's youth justice system underpins many of the specific failures identified in the report. Queensland detains more children than any other state or territory in Australia (an average of 292 per day in 2023-24), with Queensland YDCs operating at 99.6% capacity. This represents the highest utilisation rate in the nation, and significantly above the recognised safe operations of 85% capacity. The Inspector noted that at the time of the inspections, children were being held in police watch houses, awaiting transfer to a youth detention centre.

Centre	YDC Population on inspection date		Safe capacity	Operating capacity	% who identify as First Nations
Brisbane YDC	158	29 Jul 2024	137	162	62%
Cleveland YDC	100	5 Nov 2024	95	112	94%
West Moreton YDC	32	26 Feb 2024	27	32	69%

Separations: widespread use and inhumane conditions

Separations were utilised extensively across all YDCs. The report indicated separations were often for prolonged periods and responding to systemic issues, rather than behavioural incidents. Separation relating to the protection of people ('Type D'; used to record staff shortage separations, as indicated by the department's policy) were the most frequently engaged. Aside from separations for illness, Type D separations were of the longest duration.

Cleveland YDC experienced the greatest impact from staff shortages, with separations of 2 hours or more on over 50% of days in some units during the review period. In June-July 2024, children were in extended separation (effectively 24 hours or more) 61% of the time, including some instances of being separated for six consecutive days. While 2025 data showed a reduction in the most extended separations, the reliance on shorter (2-12 hour) separations has continued.

Conditions of separation rooms

Children were frequently held in separation rooms that are described as inhumane and fail to meet basic standards of decency.

Lack of Basic Facilities: Separation rooms are small, concrete spaces with bare floors and walls. They contain no toilet, no basin with running water, and no furniture.

Unhygienic Environment: Inspectors observed rooms that were covered in graffiti, dirty, and, in multiple instances, soiled with urine. A case study from Cleveland YDC documented urine remaining on a separation room floor for seven hours, whilst a child was placed in the room. Children reported being forced to urinate in a floor drain when requests for the bathroom were ignored.

No Child-Initiated Intercom: While intercoms exist, they could only be initiated by staff. A child locked in a separation room must shout or bang on the door to attract attention, which poses risk in a medical emergency or if a child needs access to a toilet between observation checks that are not occurring as required.



Photos from the on-site inspection of Brisbane YDC.

Inspector of Detention Services, Office of the Queensland Ombudsman. (2025). *Combined inspection report for youth detention centres: A report on our 2024 inspections of 3 Queensland youth detention centres – West Moreton, Brisbane and Cleveland.* Office of the Queensland Ombudsman. <https://www.ombudsman.qld.gov.au/publications/detention-inspection-reports/ydc-inspections-combined-report-2025/ydc-inspections-combined-report-2025>

Queensland Ombudsman: 2024 Combined Inspection Report for Youth Detention Centres - *continued*

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

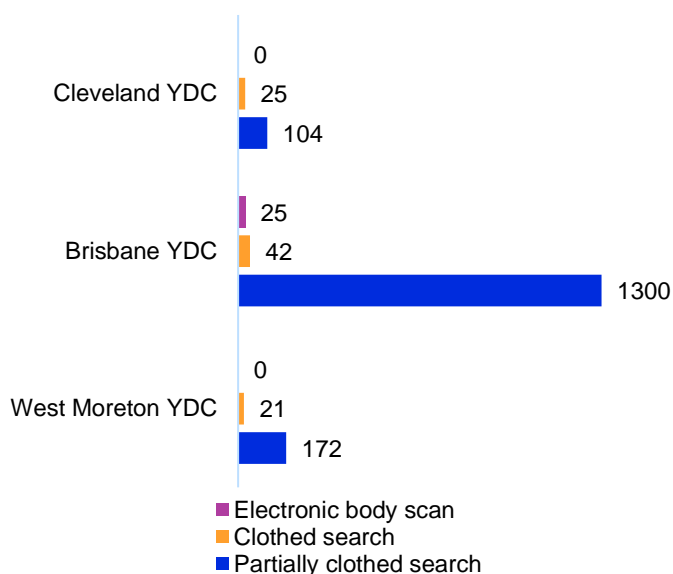
OVER-REPRESENTATION

Personal searches of children

Search practices across the centres show a disparity in approaches, with an over-reliance on invasive searches at two of the three YDCs inspected.

Routine Partially Clothed Searches: Brisbane and West Moreton YDCs conduct 'partially clothed searches' as a routine part of the admissions process. This is in direct contrast to Cleveland YDC, which uses a risk-based approach and conducts far fewer such searches.

Number and type of searches:



Use of force and restraint

Use of force and restraint in YDCs is governed by policies that emphasise de-escalation, but inspections found inconsistencies in practice, training and oversight.

Use of Unapproved Techniques: Staff, particularly long-term staff, continue to use techniques from the defunct "Protection Actions Continuum" model instead of the current "Communication and Resolution Techniques" model, which was fully adopted in 2021. This includes unapproved escort holds and leg locks.

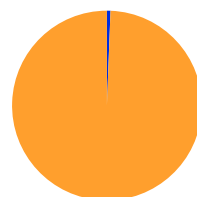
Legislative Gaps: The authority to use force and restraints is defined in the *Youth Justice Regulation 2016*, not the *Youth Justice Act 1992*. The report recommended legislative amendments are required to define the use of force, list approved physical restraints and explicitly ban spit hoods.

Conclusion

The Inspector of Detention Services made 34 recommendations, primarily to the Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support, to remedy concerns identified in the 2024 inspections and subsequent data. Many of the recommendations focus on addressing the issues resulting from high utilisation rates and staff shortages, as well as ensuring the dignity and humane treatment of the children and young people in detention in Queensland.

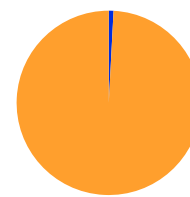
Inefficacy of partially clothed searches

At Brisbane YDC, only 7 of 1,157 partially clothed admission searches found contraband.



■ Found contraband

At West Moreton YDC, only one of 120 found contraband.



■ Found contraband

The report noted that most administrative records did not record the reason for why a partially clothed search was chosen instead of a clothed search.

Cleveland YDC was noted to be utilising a risk-based assessment to determine the search's necessity.

The report suggests the practice is not effective in identifying contraband and unnecessarily subjects children to a demeaning and potentially traumatising procedure. The report highlights that making partially clothed searches routine prioritises security procedures over the dignity and wellbeing of children.

Health and wellbeing

Suicide and self-harm risk: A number of issues were identified relating to the management of suicide and self-harm risk, including failed mandatory observations due to staff shortages, and lack of First Nations cultural input.

Harm Assessments: The policy guiding harm assessments lacks meaningful, evidence-based guidance, relying heavily on subjective professional judgment. It also failed to adequately address the concept of cultural harm for First Nations children.

Access to Medical Care: At West Moreton YDC, children's medical appointments were frequently cancelled due to a lack of available staff to escort them to clinics at Brisbane YDC or to external hospitals. This was noted as not being of concern at Cleveland YDC, where health services are prioritized despite staff shortages.

Evidence-based approaches to child justice: Supplementary paper to ‘Help Way Earlier’

YOUTH JUSTICE

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) published the ‘Help Way Earlier’ report in August 2024, which identified key concerns and gaps in service in youth justice systems across the country and called for urgent, systemic reform. The AHRC have since published a supplementary report detailing several evidence-based approaches to youth justice from Australia and overseas that demonstrate the success of holistic, therapeutic and preventative approaches. The report describes the differing approaches of each model, the evidence of impact, and key learnings for each model.

A Whole System Approach (Scotland)

Description: The whole system approach aims to divert children (aged 12-17) from the justice system through early, coordinated work across services including police, social work, education, and health. It is a flexible, non-mandated framework that enables local stakeholders to work together to address community-specific challenges. The Scottish government’s philosophy is that public protection and children’s rights are interdependent.

Legislative reform: In 2019, Scotland raised the age of criminal responsibility to 12, fully incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law (2024), and ending the placement of children in young offender institutions (2024).

Evidence of impact: Between 2008-09 and 2021-22, there was a 92% reduction in children prosecuted in Scottish courts and a 97% reduction in 16 to 17-year-olds sentenced to custody. The average daily number of 16-17-year-olds in prison in 2022-23 was nearly 20 times lower than in 2009-10. Recent data shows a decrease in violent crimes committed by children from 2,301 to 1,914 compared to the previous year, and a 40.9% decrease in serious assaults.

Primary Prevention: Pathways to Prevention Project (Queensland)

Description: Operating for ten years in a highly disadvantaged area of Brisbane, the project was a partnership between the Department of Education, Mission Australia, and Griffith University. It targeted children aged 4-6 transitioning to school and provided an enhanced communication program, and family support services.

Evidence of impact: Evaluation of the program found evidence that the communication program reduced the number of young people involved in youth crime by more than 50%. This also had a community-wide effect, with the rate of youth offending 20% lower than other Queensland regions of similar socio-economic levels.

Small-scale, Therapeutic Alternatives to Detention

Across all Australian jurisdictions, a small number of children are responsible for a large proportion of youth crime, with high recidivism rates indicating that punitive detention models are not effective.

Three models from the Netherlands, USA (Missouri model), and Spain (Diagrama model) are described in the report. These models demonstrate the efficacy of small-scale, community-based, therapeutic facilities in improving outcomes for young people, as well as the community.

These models are built on principles of relational security, where safety is created through constructive, trusting relationships between staff and young people, rather than through coercion.

Aboriginal-led initiative: Baulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu (Walgett, NSW)

Description: Initiated in 2016, the model is a holistic, culturally connected framework aimed at reducing Aboriginal children’s contact with the justice system. It operates both ‘upstream’ (early intervention for at-risk youth) and ‘downstream’ (intensive work with system-involved youth), recognizing that justice outcomes are tied to broader wellbeing across education, health, and care.

Evidence of impact: The initiative’s goal to have less than 10% of Aboriginal children from Walgett appearing in the Children’s Court was met, with the figure dropping to 7.8% in 2021 (a 32% decrease from 2016).

There have been overall reductions in charges and court cases, and a decrease in custodial episodes. A data linkage project is currently underway to further elucidate the impacts across police, court, custody, education and health systems.

Return on investment of the Pathways to Prevention Project from reducing youth offending

CHILD SAFETY

YOUTH JUSTICE

EARLY INTERVENTION

A study published in *Children and Youth Services Review* has analysed the economic impact of the Pathways to Prevention project from the reduced likelihood of youth offending. Focussing on the communication program delivered as part of the project, researchers found a substantial return on investment from the outcomes of participation in communication program. Subsequent research will address the outcomes from the family support services.

Pathways to Prevention Project

Pathways to Prevention was a community-developed, developmentally-informed early intervention initiative implemented in a disadvantaged area in Brisbane. Developed and jointly run by Mission Australia, Griffith University, the Department of Education and seven local preschools and primary schools. Programs were delivered to nearly 1,500 children aged 4-11 years and their families. Multiple preschool enrichment programs were delivered; the Preschool Intervention Program for 4-year-old children in 2002 and again in 2003, and a comprehensive family support program which extended from 2002 until 2011. Previous studies* have shown that Pathways to Prevention resulted in a significant reduction in youth crime in areas the programs were delivered.

Communication program

The communication program analysed in this study was an enriched preschool program delivered to a number of cohorts of children in 2002 and 2003. The programs were designed to enhance children's communication and oral language skills, based on the principle that children with higher language skills were better equipped to navigate social situations, fostering positive interpersonal relationships and making them less likely to participate in disruptive behaviours. 214 children participated in this program in 2002 and 2003. The program was designed and implemented by specialist teachers working in close partnership with classroom teachers and parents to create a 30-week program enhancing children's functional communication skills.

Methodology

The sample in this study was 618 four-year-olds whose parent consented to data collection, of which; 214 participated in the communication program, and 404 formed the control group. The study followed participants to age 17, linking project data with youth justice records.

The authors acknowledged the program was delivered in a specific urban context. Further research is required to explore how the program could be scaled to meet the needs of a broader range of diverse communities, particularly First Nations communities across the state.

Reduction in youth offending

The study found that the communication program delivered a statistically, and substantially, significant impact on reducing youth crime.

After controlling for variables, participation in the communication program resulted in 62% lower odds of serious youth offending. These results indicate that the communication program successfully prevented:

- 10** children from committing at least one offence; and
- 96** serious youth offences.

Children whose families who also received the support service exhibited zero offending. This finding highlights the positive and synergistic effects of addressing both child development and family factors through early intervention.

Economic analysis

To quantify the financial benefits of the communication program, the study conducted economic analysis on the savings generated from the youth crime avoided.

Primary return on investment

Savings to cost ratio: **\$7.65 : \$1**

The program yielded \$7.65 in savings from avoided crime for every dollar spent on the communication program.

This is also likely a conservative estimate, as the study only accounted for the reduction in court-adjudicated offences. There are other benefits from the program including improved educational outcomes, better health, reduced reliance on welfare and less unreported crime.

Policy implications

The study illustrates the efficacy of funding early intervention programs, especially those combining communication skills with family support, significantly reduce youth offending. Strengthening and supporting families is key to better outcomes for children, consistent with the ARACY Nest Wellbeing Framework.

This study provides a compelling case for the diversion of resources away from crisis-response and punitive youth justice measures, towards evidence-based early intervention. The study noted that not only is this a cost-effective approach but also aligns with Australia's human rights and child rights obligations.

* Batchelor S, Carr A, Elias G, Freiberg K, Hay I, Homel R, Lamb C, Leech M & Teague R 2006. The Pathways to Prevention project: doing developmental prevention in a disadvantaged community. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 323. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi323>
Manning, M., Wong, G. T. W., Homel, R., Allen, J., & Freiberg, K. (2024). The return on investment of the pathways to prevention project from the reduced probability of the onset of serious youth offending. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 179, 108632. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108632>

PeakCare's Workforce Strategy: Foundations of the future – building a workforce that cares, connects and evolves

CHILD SAFETY

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

OVER-REPRESENTATION

PeakCare have published *The Foundations of the Future: Queensland Residential Care Workforce Strategy* to assist in building and sustaining a skilled, valued, and resilient residential care workforce. The Strategy is presented as both a workforce strategy as well as a 'practical guide', intended to align the efforts of all stakeholders in residential care. The Strategy seeks to ensure that the workforce is equipped to deliver safe, relational and trauma-informed care, recognizing that strengthening the workforce is imperative to improving the standard of care for children and young people in residential care placements.

Development and collaboration

PeakCare's Strategy was developed primarily by PeakCare with funding from the Queensland Government, however, was created in collaboration with key partners and over **200** contributors from more than **150** organisations across the state.

Collaborators included residential care workers, children and young people with lived experiences, families, sector leaders, peak bodies, cultural advisors, educators, and government representatives.

Perspectives of young people

The lived experiences of young people were incorporated into the Strategy, to set priorities, tone and purpose.

Key insights included the need for relational stability; seeking workers who "*care enough to stay*", are consistent, and listen to them as equals. The best workers were described to be those who "*see past the files*" and make them "*feel like [I] mattered*".

Young people emphasised that when workers feel supported, trained and respected, it enables young people to feel safe.

Perspectives of residential care workers

Residential care workers define their roles as a vocation requiring skill and courage yet feel intensely undervalued and under-supported by the system.

They described a stigma that reduces them to "*babysitters*" or a system that sees "*the chaos, not the care*". The fundamental demand of workers was for systematic support, safety, and meaningful supervision:

"If we're not supported ourselves, how can we support them?"

Strategic priorities for action

1. Investing in developing system enablers to empower the workforce

This addresses systematic issues by advocating for reforming funding models to reduce casualisation, create a centralised worker register to improve data collection, responsive regulation that enables relational practice, and investment in leadership development.

2. Creating meaningful career pathways and development opportunities

This priority focuses on establishing clear career frameworks, training and ongoing learning, structured mentoring programs, and formal recognition of the skill and dedication required for residential care work to build professional identity and improve workforce retention.

3. Building a collaborative and respectful workforce culture

This aims to break down organisational silos, by fostering inter-agency collaboration, sharing learning across agencies and across the sector, and embedding cultural safety as a critical part of team culture.

4. Strengthening community understanding and support

This involves shifting the public narrative around residential care by challenging stigma, promoting understanding through positive storytelling, media partnerships, and co-designed campaigns that promote the voices of young people.

Conclusion

PeakCare's Strategy asserts that a strong, skilled, and supported residential care workforce is essential to delivering safe, stable, and trauma-informed care for children and young people. PeakCare notes that realising the vision outlined in the strategy is a shared responsibility, requiring ongoing engagement and collective action from government, service providers, and the community, to ensure that the system can be reformed to deliver effective care and positive outcomes.

Queensland Human Rights Commission: Annual Report 2024–2025

CHILD SAFETY

The Queensland Human Rights Commission (QHRC) has published its 2024–2025 Annual Report, outlining its work as the independent statutory body working under the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* and the *Human Rights Act 2019*. In 2024–25, the QHRC received **1,529** complaints and finalised **1,628**. The majority of accepted discrimination complaints related to impairment discrimination (63%); the workplace (or seeking work) was the most common area of complaint (42%).

The QHRC finalised **33** human rights complaints made on behalf of children and young people. There was an increase in complaints alleging human rights breaches relating to children and young people being held in watch houses. The complaints outline concerns regarding being held for extended periods, access to medication, treatment by staff and the conditions of the facilities. The child safety sector accounted for five accepted and finalised human rights complaints.

The QHRC's annual report notes some significant initiatives in 2024–2025 included:

- Establishing the Yirrimba First Nations Unit, designed to embed cultural leadership and ensure culturally safe engagement. The QHRC also hosted the Bandarran Marra'Gu Gathering Strength Summit to discuss upholding the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Outcomes from the Summit included the Bandarran Marra'Gu Gathering Strength statement that First Nations children and young people should be a priority focus.
- A number of submissions were to parliamentary inquiries, including submissions to the tranches of 'Adult Crime, Adult Time' reforms, due to concerns over compatibility with human rights. The QHRC argued these measures were harmful to children, particularly concerning watch house detention and punitive sentencing.

This Annual Report provides insight into both the progress made and the challenges facing the Queensland Human Rights Commission in ensuring freedom, respect, equality and dignity across Queensland.

Queensland Human Rights Commission. (2025). *Annual report 2024–2025*. Queensland Government. <https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/about-us/annual-reports>

Department of Housing and Public Works: Annual Report 2024–2025

CHILD SAFETY

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

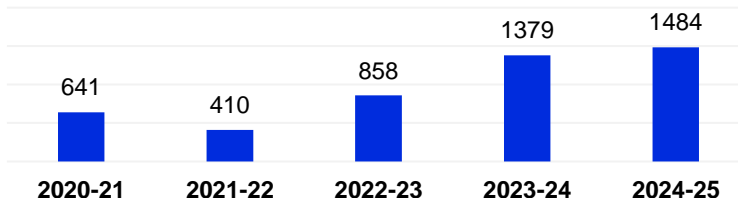
The 2024–2025 Annual Report for the Department of Housing and Public Works (DHPW) discusses the department's delivery of housing, building, and service innovation across the state.

The report noted a number of key achievements of DHPW for 2024–2025. Some of these achievements for Queensland families and children included:

- Establishing a Housing and Support Link Service, to support young parent and assist families on housing and support needs. This program received \$3.6 million in funding over three years.
- Implementation of a supported tenancies initiative aimed at young parents at risk of homelessness. DHPW provided funding of \$285,000 for this initiative.
- A 40-unit youth foyer was delivered in Townsville, offering housing and support for vulnerable young people aged 16 to 12 years.

DHPW delivered 1,484 social or affordable homes in 2024–2025, in response to considerably higher demand.

Delivery of social and affordable housing in Queensland:



DHPW noted that tightening of the private rental market translates directly into higher demand for government assistance, resulting in longer wait times. In 2024–2025, 100% of new households allocated to social housing were in the 'very high' or 'high need' categories. This figure is much higher than the Australian average of 87.4%.

Department of Housing and Public Works. (2025). *Annual Report 2024–2025*. Queensland Government. <https://www.housing.qld.gov.au/news-publications/annual-report>

Childhood Offending, Adverse Experiences, and Systematic Failure in New Zealand

CHILD SAFETY

CHILD SAFE ORGANISATIONS

OVER-REPRESENTATION

Research published in *Children and Youth Services Review* analysed youth justice administrative data on almost 50,000 New Zealand children born in the year 2000, to demonstrate how systemic failures of government services often allow the trajectory from early adversity to persistent offending to continue.

The findings of the study align with consistent concerns in other nations, including Australia, which also faces analogous challenges such as the 'crossover cohort' phenomenon involving children across child protection and youth justice systems, and the disproportionate impact on First Nations peoples of systematic government failures.

Offending profiles of cohort

Of the 48,975-person cohort included in the study, **86.3%** had no recorded offending history up to age 19 years. The remaining were allocated into three groups:

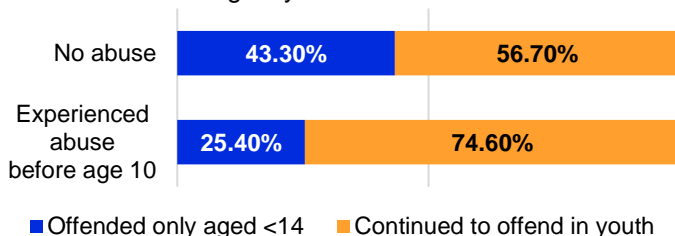
- Child-only offenders (<14 years): 1.5% (n=753)
- Youth-only offenders (14-18 years): 9.6% (n=4,701)
- "Both" group (<18 years): 2.6% (n=1,269)

Of note was the strong link between early onset and continued offending. Of children who offended before age 14 years, 63% went on to reoffend as youth.

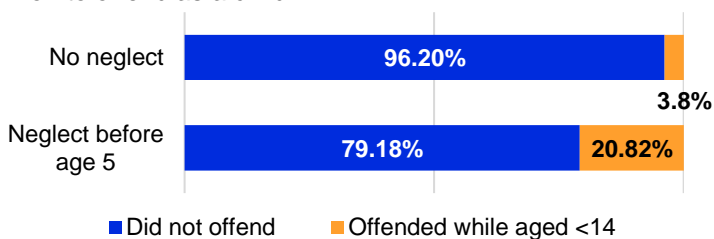
Within the "both" group, approximately 50% offended once as a child, 20% twice, and 30% three or more times. Notably, 99 children in the cohort had committed between 6 and 10 offenses before reaching age 14 years.

Child maltreatment and system contact

Among children who offended, those who had been abused before age 10 were significantly more likely to continue offending as youth.



Similarly, children who experienced neglect before age 5 were significantly more likely to offend before age 14. Notably, 20.8% of children neglected before age 5 went on to offend as a child.



Children who were placed in out-of-home care were significantly more likely to offend than their peers, with children placed in care before their 5th birthday being significantly more likely to offend across all age groups.

Additional government service contacts

Intergenerational Disadvantage: Having a parent involved with the justice system, experiencing financial hardship, and living in deprived neighbourhoods were all significantly associated with higher rates of offending.

Among those who offended as both a child and a youth, 88.9% had a justice-involved parent, with 46% of this group having both parents involved in the justice system.

Educational Disengagement: School suspensions, expulsions, and frequent school changes were powerful predictors of offending and reoffending, acting as key turning points toward the justice system.

Of the child offenders who were suspended, 81% reoffended as youth, compared to 61% of non-suspended child offenders. 47% of all children expelled before age 14 offended as both a child and a youth.

Disproportionate Impact on Indigenous Peoples:

Indigenous Māori children were disproportionately represented across all offending groups in the cohort, reflecting wider patterns of social inequity, systemic racism, and the ongoing harms of colonization.

The study notes the use of government datasets is problematic due to a number of factors including perpetuating bias, deficit framing, and absence of data sovereignty.

Conclusion

This research provides population-level evidence that early childhood offending is a predictable outcome of adversity that government services systematically fail to address, despite numerous opportunities for intervention. The offending trajectory was not effectively interrupted and often reinforced, evidenced by the finding that being placed in care was associated with significantly more offending.

The study challenges the notion that the problem is inherent to the child, stating that the findings reflect the "social, political and cultural contexts in which the data are collected."