

## *Original Paper*

# Where are the Parents? The Drama of Youth Crime in the Media an Australian Focussed Discourse Analysis

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### ***Abstract***

*The language in media stories surrounding the high drama of juvenile and youth crime is very alarmist and continues to fuel political debates and demands for tougher penalties rather than the proverbial slap on the wrist for young offenders. Further there are fear discourse elements that suggest that for some politicians cited in the daily news cycle as being “out of control”. In opposition to this fear and alarmist discourse in the notion that the media news cycle highlights youth crime for its sensationalist perspectives and poor reporting of youth courts and their judgments in such matters. A comprehensive discourse analysis of youth crime reporting may suggest that media must take the blame for some of the inappropriate focus on youth crime as being selective. This yearlong study suggests that the public need more information to see for themselves whether the current moves and political debates need to be reviewed and refreshed. In addition, family supports are a signal to consider as presented by expert authorities involved in decision making and reporting.*

### **Introduction: A Youth Crime Study in Media: Chaos Drama and Badly Behaved. Where is this coming from? Thousands of years of complaining still echoes today**

For more than 2500 years there has been a plethora of complaints about the youth of today. We are mostly familiar with Socrates complaints of them being *disrespectful and not listening to their parents* and refusing to do as they are told. Clearly disobedient children and teenagers are not a new phenomenon. This study aims to see what is extant in today’s media. There is ample research that clearly identifies that youth and young people are affected by their upbringing and their parenting and when growing up in dysfunctional homes where love affection and education is ignored and not given chances to succeed are that young teenagers may find themselves in trouble. According to research conducted by Boxall Cooley and Lawler in 2021 the percentage of young people who commit crimes

are more likely to emanate from dysfunctional home lives and have been subjected to domestic violence perpetrated on themselves or other members of the family.

Social work studies also reflect this view and there are significant examples that show...around the world social workers and professors of sociology are grappling with what appears in the news to be a world-wide phenomenon. For example, from as far away as Ethiopia (Tekelwoyni, Zeleke, & Kidane, 2021) the issues are considered and looking to other nations for similarities and differences.

Just as Australia appears to be grappling with the problem of youth crime according to the media other countries are finding that their communities are facing similar issues.

This media discourse study of over 100 media platforms focusses on media reporting of youth crime as a moral panic and political debates in Australia and other countries which have presented reports of this type of criminal behaviour. Moral panic in communities about crime have been reported in many studies and especially within the context of *fear discourse* as outlined by Altheide and more recently by Lee and Mythen in their seminal book on Fear of Crime (Lee & Mythen, 2018). Indeed, the notion of moral panic has set in as politicians step up to microphones detailing that if elected, they will be *tough on crime* and that those currently in government must do something to curb this problem. Cohen first outlined moral panic in communities as early as 1976 and again revisited this idea in 2002 when he outlined the gangs of *Mods and Rockers* in England. Other researchers joined the concern and the idea of concerns in media becoming a campaign to elicit a new form of policy became the norm in news reporting (Cohen, 2001).

In Britain the problem of “aimless youth wandering the streets” and that gun and knife crime has been on the rise in Britain. According to Bhuller (2018) citing youth crime statistics from 2018 more than 40,000 young people were apprehended for proven possession of a knife and also suggesting large numbers of youth entering into the justice system. Many researchers are considering more than a euro centric or modern democratic national approach and suggest that a nuanced view of community distress is often amplified by the method of reporting in modern media platforms. Other media platforms in Europe and the West suggest that the large number of young male refugees (Alkoissa, 2018) from various countries that do not share the significant mores and values of that society are also fuelling the concerns in fear discourse.

An early sweep of media platforms is replete with significant pejorative or aggressive lexis (word choices) which borrow heavily on conflict and war like tropes. They are charted below as a first measure of the type and style of reporting that leads to fear discourse and panic. Such is the use of these discourse elements that it clearly is having some impact within media and some communities. In fact, David Altheide (2023) is known for his work over many years in what he calls fear discourse and moral panic being used as a form of political football in order to encourage a *tough on crime approach*. There have also been many stories in mainstream newspapers that drive the communication of fear and demanding a **tougher line** from authorities such as the police and the justice system. In a story in the

Australian by David Penberthy (2023) who describes the city of Pt Augusta in the north of South Australia (often known as the gateway to the Outback) marked mayhem and that there are some people who are calling for change to prevent the spate or crime wave. This commentary and report suggested that; “Port Augusta has become synonymous with mayhem” He goes on to describe *joyriding* itself almost an oxymoron as a lexical choice as there is no joy when the car is crashed injuring young people attempting to escape police a regular type of news item on nightly TV news. It should be noted here that Pt Augusta has a large indigenous population and often the offenders are locals from that community.

Further in this story are details of *booze filled crowds of yahoos* and break-ins as commonplace and frequently used as descriptions. An indigenous man an elder in the Pt Augusta community Mr Malcom “Tiger” McKenzie has described families as seemingly out of control and very dysfunctional which he blames on the withdrawal of the welfare cashless card which controls how indigenous families spend their money and in particular, on what is allowed to be bought on this card. Within this article there were also reports of young people being injured and police officers being injured in the line of duty. In another recent story online and reports related to judicial officers the journalist raised the usual question related to youth crime waves reported in Queensland and in the Northern Territory of Australia (Furler, 2023).

He suggested that: **“But after more than 20 years watching the courts, I think the justice is wrong on one big thing. Some of our judges and magistrates are completely out of step with public opinion”**. In his opinion widely circulated and repeated on social media there is a significant lexical choice of topic which blames the justice system for some of the ills reported daily by mainstream and other platforms. Discourse analysts suggest that the major topics outline and then reiterated through *semantic macrostructures* such as headlines (Teo, 2000) set in train a belief system of how to read the stories and this in turn creates a public perception of distrust and in this case with the justice system.

Similar reports of suggestion of the race and cultural or ethnic identity are overtly displayed when media cameras are deployed and despite pixilating faces to reveal their overt backgrounds and this can often be seen as their arms and legs are videotaped being placed in a paddy wagon or police vehicle for the nightly news reports. Other subtext cues are given when the news anchor announces we spoke to XYZ Community Leader for his/her report on the latest problem crime spree. For example, in the USA descriptions of offenders are quite blatantly reported as *Black African Latino or Arabic* whereas in Australia it is often ignored and only when the news pictures flash on screen and “community leaders” are asked for an opinion that the viewer clearly understands the cue... the offender is not white or Caucasian. Again Mark Furler has added that: **“Space limitations, particularly in radio and TV reports, mean every intricacy of a person's background is not revealed”**. While this is true in principle it is clear that linguistic constructions will tell a different story and those often appear in headlines. Various discourse analysts such as Van Dijk (1998) have researched the power of *semantic*

*macrostructures* that appear in discourse as headlines or paragraph leads and are often bolded on website to draw what is commonly termed clickbait. This attracts readers and viewers, and the type and style of language is often used to describe and cast attention via fearful statements.

For example, the table below highlights headlined macro structures as descriptors of the youth involved in crime. It can also be seen that this table identifies significant behaviours in each of the elements of the table and they are not modified as youth that are neglected or disadvantaged or uneducated or disturbed suggesting that they are capable of intelligent choices and thus are to be blamed for the distress and disruption that are produced by their behaviours. Several of the descriptions are designated by race and as such can be seen as overtly racist in nature. For example, Teo cited above has indicated that at a certain point in time Vietnamese youth were heavily involved in crime if newspapers at the time were to be believed. In addition, Van Dijk (2003) has suggested as immigration debates raged in Europe in the 1980's that a deal of the anti and right-wing approach to the ideology of migrants seeking a better life in the Western Democracies were race based. His research has since been identified by various UN and other reports as significant in changing the support for refugees and migrants in political and other discourses. This appears to still be a topic of debate.

#### **Discourse Analysis Method of lexical choice and newsworthy topics**

More than 150 websites were submitted to a lexical choice textual analysis and the major themes and topics were collated and listed according to frequency of appearances in news stories both on major online platforms and newspapers and other outlets. Also included are television stories which used the term youth crime, teenage crime and youth crime wave as examples of headlines to each story.

Following the collation a table was commenced of each of the frequency themes and topics and listed in a table for ease of understanding the main methods of describing the crimes and critical incidents. The table below following shows a clear sensational approach which identifies young people as in control and having agency in upsetting and garnering media attention. In addition, it can be see that in most of the incidents reported that the community were likely to be in danger and that the government of the day needed to respond in some way. (Examples of this include the demands by a parent advocacy group appearing on national television in Australia).

**Table 1. Of Headlines: Lexical Choice Topics and Number of Descriptions in Media**

JOYRIDER/ JOYRIDING (stolen cars)	76
CRIME WAVE	45
STEALING	33
RAMPAGE/ABORIGINAL	21
SPREE	23
OFFENDERS/INDIGENOUS	57
CALLOW YOUTHS	13
AIMLESS	15
DRUG ADDICTED	27
INTOXICATED	37
VIOLENT	24
MURDER CHARGES	8
DELINQUENTS/MISGUIDED	20
CRASHING CARS	26
ILLEGAL USE (OF MOTOR VEHICLES)	22
YOUNG MALES/AFRICAN GANG	31
SMASH AND GRAB RAID	21
HOME INVASION	7
BLACK YOUTHS/INDIGENOUS	9
AFRICAN GANGS	5
CRASHING CARS	13
KNIFE CARRYING	9
STABBING	5
ASSAULTING	8
DANGER/MACHETE ATTACK	27
ANTI SOCIAL MISFITS	3
TEEN KILLERS	2

### **Media Reporting of Youth Crimes online and mainstream**

The table above reveals that there is a lot of fear and trepidation surrounding the phenomenon of youth crime. As headlines and media platforms suggest headlines are actively indicating that youth crime and delinquent behaviour are soaring. From city to city and major regional towns the notion that young people are “out of control” is beyond the reach of caring parents, schools or community.

Communication theory holds that frequency is a clear indication that the media will begin a campaign of what Schulz (2010-2011) calls the “discourse of direction”. In this the media start making inferences

that policies and practices should call for “tough on crime” or stricter controls by policing methods. This has certainly been seen in several media stories suggesting that the proverbial “slap on the wrist” penalties for youth crime are no longer stopping young people from offending. For example, ABC political reporter Kate Mc Kenna (2023) has written about the strict new laws passed by Queensland Parliament which will ensure “tougher penalties”. Accompanying the story is a graphic series of icons displaying the effect these tougher laws will have on young offenders including stricter bail conditions of the age range affected (10-17-year-olds) and indeed, what will occur if they posted their escapades on social media and the likelihood of having to wear ankle bracelets if bailed to go home and await a court date. This has occurred as criticism of the *slap on the wrist* approach to giving young people extra chances to change their behaviour which appear to have failed.

There are also calls to penalise dysfunctional families and parents for ignoring their children’s behaviours and allowing them to roam freely throughout the suburbs and creating mayhem and other fearful events such as burnouts and car crashes. The drama of such delinquent behaviour is such that an ABC report from the far north of Queensland described “a record spate of car thefts” (Testa et al., 2022) and reporting on calls for greater punitive measures to stop this activity creating fear and uncertainty in the community. There are often calls for some sort of behavioural rehabilitation and occasionally we see calls to make children join the army for a spate of discipline.

For example in New Zealand (2013) there is a style of military intervention which has been used since 2010-2013 and has claimed a benefit of prevention of serious re-offending... their website claims that: “The MAC programme was designed to provide intensive wraparound support to 40 of the most serious and persistent young male offenders each year to assist them to make pro-social choices (e.g., not reoffending) and ultimately make a successful transition to adulthood”.

Since then, various other options in New Zealand have been tried as intervention and recent political activity by one party promises to bring back this specific program and expand it further. In Australia the calls are getting louder via media that the Government[s] must do something to stop this offending and to make communities feel safe again. Among these are the calls to blame the parents for their children’s behaviour. One such example is the article by Sonia Hickey for *Australian Criminal Lawyers* in which she asks the question: Should parents be held responsible for the Crimes of their Children? As the article suggests the answer is very complex and may in fact need legal help to untangle the web of issues that are involved. Whether in fact a parent can be proven to have by virtue of neglect or wilful default lead to the committing of a crime by their children can be considered within the *Children (Parental Responsibility Act 1997 NSW)*.

In Australia the calls for getting tough on crime and children as offenders is increasing. Only in recent times there have been pejorative descriptions of a failure of the justice system by various media platforms and the lexical choices of the reports echoes that of the table presented earlier. This again highlights the “moral panic” and fear discourse so prevalent in current media reporting of justice issues.

Such is the *moral panic* that in some places private security has been employed by residents to stop the “crime wave” (Herbert & Mackenzie, 2022). Further research on this issue showed that other part of Australia have resorted to doing likewise in order to ensure the safety of residents and community property owners. A full list of websites is available to view on most search engines and the significant word usage is similar to others media platforms that “call” for a range of options in order to stop the damage and distress it appears to cause.

### **Analysing the discourse: Anaphora**

All discourse analysts suggest that the first sweep should most often check the topic and lexical choices and their frequency of usage. This is shown in the previous table. This appears to clearly represent the main focus of attention for the authors reporters and commentators. Table one listed above is clear that there is a lot to be afraid of and further studies of the websites considered for this research clearly outline via *Anaphora* the retracing or repetition of certain elements of the stories that add extra weight to the stories. While this research has focussed early on the frequency measurement of the lexical choices made by media a more intense examination of the most repeated phraseology or word choice via *Anaphora* traces a clear path toward a system out of control, a community in fear of their lives and their property and personal well-being.

**Table 2. Anaphora and Repetition in Media Reporting**

<b>Topic/Anaphora (repetition)</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Justice failure	Confidence in justice system disrespected
Judge bails teenage (killer car thief, hoon driver, home invader)	Judges cannot be trusted to do the right thing by community
Teenager commits crimes while on bail	Justice system cannot control anti-social behaviour
Slap on the wrist	Approach to youth crime is not working and too soft
Crime wave/spate	Herald an overwhelming problem
Judges are too soft	Suggest that courts can solve social problems by locking up offenders or placing them in some form of detention
People living in fear	Government and authority unable to quell <i>crime wave</i>
Police resources stretched to limit	As above

Growing number of vigilantes in response to crime	Community decides to become the authority
Youth control the streets	Community fear government unable to quell crime wave
Vigilantes take matters into their own hands	? suggestion of the mob or people power taking over authority
Where are the parents?	Family dysfunction seen as a negative failure by society and community members
Who pays for the damage?	Calls for reparation and support
Community anxiety as youth crime escalates	Demands for action to quell and stop crime wave reported
Police are powerless	Police are blamed if they take action that results in injury or harm.

*Anaphora* (Gill & Whedbee, 1997) (repetition) is seen by several discourse analysts as a major rhetorical device used to indicate a speakers' major focus. It draws in their audience and establishes—or at least claims—a commonality of ideology for the reporting teams whether on mainstream media platforms or on social media this is evident throughout the websites and media analysed. The terms *public*, *confidence*, *criticism* and *justice failures* while situated in open opposition to one another, are repeated many times within the texts. A recurrent—and powerful—narrative sequencing is established: one which is directed towards explanatory and justificatory purposes. And underlying this discourse of direction pattern of response to critique is an equally powerful set of *conflict* metaphors. The table below taken from media reports shows the power of such anaphora or retracing of the main points at issue.

The table above clearly identifies that around Australian and regional areas that young people offending are a menace to social order, community well-being and community trust in authority. As this author identified so many years ago the media campaigns are moving towards *giving way to the Discourse of Direction*. In addition, the media have started campaigns calling for tougher sentencing and changes to bail laws which place a strong emphasis on keeping young repeat offenders “off the streets” (Rachwani, 2022).

In discourse terms however, *lacunae* are evident. *Lacunae* are what is missing in the discourse but evident to the readers or viewers (Teo, 2000). This needs further study by others but clearly one anaphora is *parental dysfunction* that is constantly avoided. Often what is deselected is as important as what is clearly focussed on in news reports. As Schulz and Cannon found (Schulz & Cannon, 2013)



missing terms in sentencing often found their way into media reports these included words such as penalty and punishment. There is some speculation that actually naming and shaming parents could in fact be considered as racially vilifying others. As a consequence little information is available about parental and family dysfunction categories.

There are also similar stories around Australia and indeed the world about order and control following youth offending or the unfortunate death of a presumed young offender whether in a stolen car that has crashed or some other reason that a police patrol has found them to be a person of interest. The police are required to protect law and order and to apprehend wrong doing and in the instance in France the case of Nahel (no other name given) a 17 year old male of African descent known to police for failure to comply at traffic stops or being caught committing offences and placing people at risk has resulted in blazing headlines (semantic macrostructures) suggested that France is *convulsed* and that *riots in the streets* have plagued the community. Smouldering cars set alight by the rioters have been used as a trope for “*smouldering resentment*” by people of colour who feel they are unfairly targeted. While the world grapples with children out of control on the front pages or headlining news services many journalists tread warily around terms such as disadvantage and ethnicity. This is surely worthy of further discussion and debate by others (Note 2).

### **Media Framing: *Emotion Sensation Division Conflict and Celebrity***

According to Media theorists (Mc Combs, 2004) the above frames constitute most stories on mainstream media platforms, but the civilian journalists and bloggers are also using this keynote drama of youth crime to gain solidarity and click bait interest. One such example is the spate of issues raised about young black men here and abroad who when faced with police intervention may be arrested or other violence and car chases etc take place.

These are often online showing cars ablaze or large crowds in the streets holding vigil over presumed police issues who have allegedly the facilitated death of a young person of colour. In all these stories the passion and division highlight these young people as celebrity if even for a moment while the story gathers momentum.

Emotion and the other elements are also more likely to find their way into news stories particularly if a number of teens (possibly a gang) actively attack and raid a worthy victim.

There are several views on what constitutes a worthy victim particularly if they happen to be young and pretty or elderly and vulnerable or worse still in a wheelchair which almost always will guarantee a story to headline a news bulletin. This view is echoed by various theorists (Silva & Guedes, 2022). For example, Silva and Guedes suggest in their study that the way in which the media represent crime often includes “sensationalist” aspects, which focus on negative images of crime in communities. Associated with the view of news as sensationalists is also the perception of them as realistic and they also suggest that the more sensational the crime or more vulnerable the victim will add more weight to the fear in

the community and draw attention to find a reason to watch and learn from the story.

Their study also includes the vulnerability of good citizens going about their daily lives and suddenly being preyed upon and traumatised by the experiences which are then actively pursued in the stories. Example of this have included significant aggressive stealing of cars by groups of teens and then crashing the vehicle. Sometimes the media shows a group of several young people hiding behind clothing being bundled into police cars.

Often this is accompanied by lurid scenes of crumpled cars and bold headlines relating TEEN CRIME. The story under the banner of SA News relays the “wild ride” and teenage boys facing multiple charges. Often the headlines loudly proclaim yet another criminal activity perpetrated by these *evil young men* and sometimes women.

### **Collocation (or the words nearest the topics)**

Collocation has been classified by many discourse analysts as a significant indicator of author mindset. De Beaugrande (De Beaugrande, 1997) calls the “collocation” of words the “company they keep”, and suggests that even modest word samples indicate a pattern that identifies issues or concerns that need attention. Fairclough (Fairclough, 2003) goes further, encouraging analysts to look for patterns that emerge in texts to show relationships, and especially clashes, between powerful and dominant discourses. According to Atkins (Atkins, 2002) frequent recurrences of such co-located selections can indicate a socially constructed point of view: one powerful enough to pull forward lexical items subconsciously as a speaker or writer composes, operating as a semi-automatic or pre-formed, “cued” selection. Atkins suggests that language conditions people’s attitudes and expectations. Those who habitually use, and re-use certain preferred words and phrases betray a settled way of thinking—and also the expectation that this will be shared by listeners. To some extent however this also applies to those who are the subjects of this language: those spoken of, who are objectified in the terms used, and who may well take up the positions of being discussed or identified. In other words, how language settles around an issue within a given community, controls community perspectives, and so behaviours. Within media frameworks certain collocations are evident on most news stories and they are often placed next to the words featured strongly in this media analysis. They *include crime, youth crime, teenage boys, and young offenders*. Below is a short selection to identify the type and style of reports and a table to exemplify this continuous *author mindset*.

**Table 3. Collocations: A Selection Juxtaposed either Side of Story Themes**

Main theme	Collocations	Implication
Crime by teenagers	Terrorise steal and abuse	Children as young as fourteen “out of control”
Car crashes at speed	Teenage boys <i>LED</i> the police a <i>merry chase</i> for kilometres more than 2 hours Teenage crime brings <i>chaos</i> <i>Joyriding</i> in cars stolen from...	Young teenagers out for fun bringing sadness and distress to community and the suburban lives whose cars were stolen and crashed
Robbery at service stations, convenient stores, shopping centres	Snatch and grab <i>Robbed at knifepoint.</i> <i>Distressed</i> shop worker /shopper etc Treated in <i>hospital for stab</i> <i>wounds</i>	Where are the Police the Justice System and Parents and why don't people know where they are at 2 am in the morning?
Stabbing frenzy at event	<i>Knife wielding</i> youth	Weapons of war against community
Car crash claims lives	<i>Danger on the roads</i> as driver aged ONLY 14 wrong side of the road	Nowhere is safe?

The drama that is implied in these stories are memorable and frightening for some readers and viewers in the community and calls to politicians to “do something” are often made by well-meaning leaders, mothers of victims, distressed parents and grieving public following inevitable terrible consequences. While collocations are part of the textual critical analysis one of the key areas of interest is the fact that for most of these stories as presented by news and major platforms it is implied that the children committing offences have “agency” and are in a level of control of the community. In fact this agency by youth is clearly identified by member of the media and general public in the *topoi* or collective thinking that follows such strident stories.

#### **Topoi (or collective thinking by groups organisations or accepted reality by community)**

The drama of youth crime has been significant in terms of *topoi* by groups who all have a stake in the discourse... Police, The Justice System, Politicians, Community Leaders, and indeed families and victims of crime. *Topoi* has been described in many discourse analyses and suggest that based on the work of Ruth Wodak (Wodak, 2009) list of the most common *topoi* which are used when negotiating specific agenda in meetings, or trying to convince an audience of one's interests, visions or positions are often used in media stories They include: 1. Topos of Burdening 2. Topos of Reality 3. Topos of

Numbers 4. Topos of History Topos of Authority 6. Topos of Threat 7. Topos of Definition 8. Topos of Justice 9. Topos of Urgency.

In these stories can be found the reality of the crimes committed by young people who ought to be home and doing their homework, the burdens placed on communities dealing with the issues that are raised by young people out of control and the sheer number of these crimes which are often related to or referred to a history of dysfunction and disordered lives. There are also long suggested lists that occur in pragmatics and argumentation and have been described and list to augment the above groupings. They include references constantly to the need for urgent action, calls for change and for the justice system to lift the burden from weary frightened victims described as elderly vulnerable unable to sleep for fear and wanting their community to calm down and show respect for one another. For the media the collective trains of thought or ideologies often are predicated by the terms outlined below from the most often selected headlines and stories.

**Table 4. Topoi in Media Stories Identified**

<b>Topoi statements</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Wild riding youth night of crime	Out of control young people <i>Topoi</i> of threat	Where are their parents
We've had enough of this	People worn out by the drama of being in fear; <i>Topoi</i> of justice injustice	Police and justice system not doing enough
We have got to change this and stop this behaviour	Who is responsible? <i>Topoi</i> of burden and reality of life in the suburbs	Should sentences be tougher even on children? Let the justice system work that out.
We must get tougher on these wild feral youths and teenage criminals	If parents and the justice system do not fix the problem then perhaps changing laws might	Laws are too lax and allow freedom to continue to offend
Slap on the wrist for juveniles in trouble with the law	Easy to get away with crimes	Laws are not strong enough to control them

Issues raised by the clear notion that the young people have agency reflects the theory of Appadurai (2006) and "the fear of small numbers". Indeed, he noted that the concept of fear and agency against such fear can affect responses and understanding. In today's complex media and ideological landscapes, people often shape their views based entirely on what they read and see in the popular mass media. To some extent this process is deliberately perpetuated by media outlets, which seek to influence public responses as an everyday way of making news and in fact to get significant clicks on their internet platforms. Further, the fear factor can often shape what people think needs to happen to change what

they see as needing fixing. This view is also shared by Beck (2005) and points out that the current spate of “panic” discourse within media reporting gives the community of media viewers and readers an unrealistic view of the current world, where personal safety is in fact not notably at risk. This is a world where, as he argues, no one appears safe, and where the general population is persuaded to believe in an exaggerated risk of becoming victims of violent crime. The news media readily select and write about the bizarre, the sensational or the most violent crime cases. The reporting, increasingly not even local, is based on what sells... The oft cited “If it bleeds, it leads” still hold true, as do the ‘four C’ principles of *Courts, Cops, Crime and Conflict*. Gross and Aday (2003) refer to the consistent and frightening world that is brought into homes via the media, describing the “scary world in your living room” and commenting on how the constant viewing of criminal matters is leading many people to believe that crime is an overwhelming problem across all modern societies. It also appears even worse if the perpetrators are seemingly in control and have agency over others, their cars, their property, their parties or their homes.

### **Where are the parents?**

Dysfunctional families their inability or unwillingness to step into the fray can at times be very frustrating. As there appears to be a community understanding that mothers and fathers ought to be doing more to make their children (often very young ones) who are committing crimes behave better and show respect to the community in which they live. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2011) report made an early link between child maltreatment and criminal activity in adolescents and young people generally. Part of their report suggests that there is evidence that:

“A nexus between abuse and neglect and adolescent offending in the lives of some children and young people, and the lack of a coordinated response to these by both the child protection and juvenile justice systems. The “early years” message has had considerable influence, particularly in relation to child protection and early intervention, but *early intervention* has largely focused on interventions *early in life* rather than *early in the pathway*”.

There are social work studies abounding showing that early intervention and parental support is a significant factor in ensuring that children have a decent chance at a good life free of intervention by the law. Good food, nutrition, loving parents, good schooling and parental and family supports are a key factor often missing in these children who find themselves joy riding and committing daring robberies as they fear they are “missing out on the good life”. In fact, there is growing evidence that this may be a part of the problem and can be considered along with a range of other areas of concern. Despite this Queensland Australia is about to become tougher in response to the crisis of young offenders which have resulted in two stabbing deaths.

As a result, Youth Offender Advocates have called for calm and asked for a review that does not include long periods of detention for convicted youth crime offenders. Stories about alternatives to the fear society and calls for greater intervention are in fact few and far between as the moral panic has

taken hold and is used by politicians to garner votes on being “tough on crime” (Smee, 2023).

**In praise of the Justice System despite the topoi of laxity and the anaphora which described Judicial Officers and Police as not fixing the problem.**

While there is ample evidence of the above topoi and anaphora judicial officers have indeed understood the information from experts such as the Australian Institute of Family Studies whose many reports show evidence that locking children up and placing them in detention harms them more than the public realises. For example, one Youth Justice Bureau paper (2012) implied that in fact there was a drop in youth crime and that diversion programs such as *conferencing* have more merit than detention in a significant number of cases.

There is a plethora of studies that shows how seriously judicial officers consider how to approach social justice issues such as youth offences, Indigenous community offending and various crimes that annoy pester and make people fearful. In recent times the author approached a former Deputy Chief Magistrate of South Australia and asked his opinion about my study and the lurid media headlining that was clearly making strong statements around Australia and around the Western Democratic nations. In reply he stated that there was significant evidence to show that over time young people (particularly boys) do take silly risks and play to their peers to *show off*. But he suggested that over time they mature grow up and become contributory members of society with appropriate social and community support. It is worth noting that this same judicial officer was among the first to start the idea of Nunga Courts and Circle Sentencing during his term of office in South Australia. It shows that judges and other judicial officers are indeed alert to the times and that their suggestions should be heard and acted upon. In fact, when a youth criminal offender is sent home on detention with a security bracelet he has not “*walked free from Court, causing outrage*” but is given a chance to reflect and re-position themselves into our community with respect for the law.

In just under a decade ago Magistrate Jennifer Bowles (2014) of Queensland was reported by the media as asking a legitimate question of the time “Why Can I lock kids up, but I can’t ensure they receive treatment?” In this report she identifies the same problem occurring even then that there were ...” too many children and young people appearing before Children’s Courts”.

She also mentions the problem of substance abuse and mental health as being part of this problem because the offenders appearing have not been given the chance to engage in treatment for their problem. In addition, this issue is not confined to Australia or New Zealand as a myriad of reports are available online to discuss the matter. For example, children as young as fourteen are appearing for trial for serious felony charges in the USA (Mistrett & Espinoza, 2021). This controversial report showed that in 2021 more than 250,000 children had been tried as adults and treated sentenced within the adult system. In fact, they state in opposition to this process and have reported that: “The children that remain exposed to the adult criminal legal system are overwhelmingly youth of colour. The vast majority serve short sentences in adult jail or prison and return home by their 21st birthdays, the age at

which services can be extended to in the youth justice system in the vast majority of states; indicating that many youths could be served, more appropriately, by the youth justice system”.

From around the Justice system judicial officers have consistently used the topoi of examining the fairness and injustice shown up by the harsh penalisation of such criminal activity by youngsters who often need support for their dysfunctional families, substance abuse or neglect situations. [Executive Summary p1].

Back in Australia late last year the former head of the Queensland’s Prison system has renewed calls for an overhaul of the youth justice system which he claims is “putting lives at risk”. The ABC report (O’Flaherty, 2022) named Keith Hamburger who, along with First Nations Leaders has impressed upon the report that the current circumstances are not fit for purpose and most particularly as detention facilities for young people. This appears to be an ongoing debate between those who call for stricter rules, harsher punishments and longer more punitive responsive sentencing. In fact, in copying a USA Experiment in reinvesting into justice the town of Bourke in New South Wales Australia, which has a high rate of First Nations young offenders reported by the *ABC Four Corners* Investigation TV program (Thompson, Mc Gregor, & Davies, 2016) which is claiming success in prevention rather than reactive detention and stopping the inevitable cycle of young offenders ending up in prison. In the western world there is a concern which is rising from the actual members of the justice systems seeing the result of the harsh *revenge junkiesm* outlined in earlier studies by Schulz (2020).

The very experts who see the results and the outcomes of the justice system for young people in trouble and in distress who act inappropriately suggests in their *topoi of concerns* the following lexical choices on a very regular basis: *Treatment Intervention Concern and Support Family Support First Nations input by Elders Children in need of care Counselling Substance Abuse rehabilitation and avoidance of court processes.*

**A Final Note: In every considered media platform in which these experts were reported the point was made to the author that the community is dealing with troubled children and not except in rare circumstances consistently violent and vicious adult persons. However, if the system fails to find a solution, then many will end up in prison learning to be violent and vicious and dangerous to society.**

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### Notes

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Note 2. A full list of the websites and media platforms researched in this study is available on request from the author.