



Vocational education: A proposal to tackle youth crime

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November 2025

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In the seemingly endless stream of media reports of violent youth gangs, car jackings and home invasions, with accompanying political point scoring, community concern is both intense and understandable.

Debate continues to rage between advocates of a '*lock em up*' strategy, regardless of the long-term consequences, and those advocating measures aimed at support and reform.

Sadly, in this whirlwind of fear, little attention is paid to educational reform strategies that might work.

Clearly, while incarcerated offenders do not threaten the community during their period in prison, for the most part they will be released back into the community as no better citizens. The result is a high level of recidivism with ex-prisoners likely to reoffend. Research is clear, particularly for young offenders, incarcerating individuals does not ensure the safety of the community in the longer run [1].

It is clear, as detailed in Tom Karmel's accompanying paper *VET and prisons* that higher levels of education and training should reduce youth crime and the level of reoffending.

Sadly, what the Mackenzie Research Institute (Karmel 2025) shows is that our corrections system mainly delivers low level qualifications, and even then with abysmal completion rates. This is against a background of most prisoners having very poor educational backgrounds. The findings reiterate a view from a 1966 Senate inquiry that described the delivery of education in prisons as a disgrace. It seems little has changed in the last 30 years.

If this situation does not change, then meaningful reductions in recidivism for youth offenders will simply not happen.

The fundamental problem is structural. While reducing recidivism through effective education may be a priority for governments, it is not necessarily a priority for prison administrators who primarily concentrate on risk reduction and security.

Whilst most young prisoners engage in some form of education, it is at a low level and unlikely to secure employment outcomes. Youth offenders, whether locked up or on supervision orders, undertake little in the way of higher levels of training or apprenticeships that could lead to stronger employment outcomes.

So how do we overcome this malaise? We propose a radically different model as an alternative to the current situation, with suitable young offenders given a second chance through training and apprenticeships.

Our Proposal

Throughout the OECD efforts to reduce recidivism in young and adult offenders all use Vocational Education and Training as a key component. This model is ambitious and based on high quality delivery within a broad view of vocational education and training. It would not be conducted in a prison.

We propose a campus, secure and specialising in training and apprenticeships in areas with high employment prospects. Taking advantage of the fact that many areas of higher-level training have a mandated job work component, a holistic program involving partnership with employment and support agencies post release would be a central component of the proposal. The aim is to get these young people back on track and into secure employment.

This new program would provide the courts with an alternative to current prison and supervision regimes for suitable offenders:

- The program would be of 8-12 months duration 7 days per week and consist of an educational program focussing on employment, with the key being employment after release.
- It would remove the participants from their community for the duration of the program.
- The program would develop occupational skills through vocational education and training, and a strengthened sense of identity outside the prison culture. It would rebuild social capital through transition support once the individual is released into the community.
- The curriculum would preferably be based on a certificate III/IV program, but would also include literacy, numeracy digital skills, and a significant outdoor education component, co-curricular activities involving community services, assistance with drug and mental health issues, and behavioural science activities to assist socialisation and self-awareness.
- It would be based on a collaboration (and funding) between departments of corrections and vocational education. It would be built on strong partnerships between TAFEs, industry (particularly industry training centres and group training companies), careers and personal counselling services, local government as well as corrections departments.
- Prior to entry and selection to the program, offenders would need to be assessed as suitable by the managing institution and commit to the program before a recommendation would be made to the courts. It is envisaged that cohorts would be small, say 24 persons in a group.
- The educational content of the program would depend on the background of the participants. We envisage cohorts of students with similar backgrounds and common aspirations. For example, a cohort could embark on electrical trade training which

would cover a substantial part of the off-the-job training of an electrical apprenticeship, articulating to an electrical apprenticeship.

- The precise educational component would depend on the educational background of the participants - for example, a group may require a particular emphasis on mathematics so that participants could successfully undertake the required electrical theory. Another group may need to concentrate on secondary education in order to achieve a basic education to open up employment opportunities.
- Vocational areas with high levels of labour demand would be targeted. Obvious examples would be the trades but there are other possibilities as well, for example the caring occupations and personal services such as hairdressing. One constraint is that there needs to be access to high quality training facilities.
- In Australia, local government has had little to do with corrections. However, the Nordic countries have assigned to local government an increased responsibility for reducing youth violence (Lopenen 2024) and this is worth serious consideration. We see local government potentially playing a key role in the successful reintegration of participants into the community, as would their families.

From a public policy perspective, the critical objective is a reduction in recidivism. Completing a training program and post-release employment outcomes should be closely monitored and reported on to ensure a reduction in recidivism is actually occurring.

Our proposal will require substantial funding and development. But this is in the context of the \$159,510 per prisoner per year which state and federal governments currently spend [2]. Against this, our proposal is a bargain if it can make inroads to the current level of recidivism. At least it would be a positive attempt to address the rise in youth crime we have seen. Certainly, our current strategies are failing.

References

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[1] According to the Productivity Commission (2025) over 50% of released prisoners returned to prison had or community corrections within two years of release

[2] This figure relates to the average cost per prisoner per year based on Productivity Commission data for 2023-24 (see Schlicht 2025).