



# Combating crime

## Professor Ross Homel

endeavours to use scientific methods to tackle social problems. He discusses his groundbreaking work, which aims to shift the crime policy focus away from punishment and towards early prevention



### What initially led you to develop an interest in criminology and, more specifically, child welfare and positive youth development?

I became interested in criminology in 1971 while finishing a Master's degree in Mathematical Statistics at the University of Sydney, Australia. One of my lecturers introduced me to Dr Tony Vinson, who had just been appointed inaugural Director of the newly formed New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Vinson recruited me as a research statistician, and inspired me with his vision for using systematic scientific research to analyse and address social problems.

A few years later, in 1976, I met the second great mentor in my career: Professor Jacqueline Goodnow, Australia's most eminent developmental psychologist. While Vinson encouraged me to use science to promote community development, Goodnow gave me the life course/human development vision of promoting human flourishing.

Since the mid-1980s, a fundamental goal in my research has been to bring together human and community development – the individual and the contextual, fused and rigorously understood through the scientific method.

### Could you introduce the Creating Pathways to Prevention project?

Creating Pathways to Prevention is ultimately about policy pathways. The project aims to reorganise government, as well as societal priorities and practices, and move tertiary, punitive responses to social problems (especially for youth crime and substance abuse) to primary prevention – the prevention of problems before they emerge or become entrenched.

### Creating Pathways to Prevention is an amalgam of two research streams: the Pathways to Prevention and CREATE projects. Could you elaborate on these?

Pathways to Prevention, which has been running since 1999, is about understanding the root causes of crime and violence, especially as they relate to social deprivation. The project endeavours to tackle such issues through family support and community strengthening strategies, rather than punishment and exclusion. A concrete objective for me is to reduce traffic down the pathway, from social disadvantage to youth detention to prison, especially for Aborigines, or First Peoples as many prefer to be called.

CREATE is an acronym that has been in use since 2012. It stands for: Collaborative, Relationships-driven, Early in the pathway, Accountable, Training-focused, Evidence-driven. Its principles of community prevention emerged from our struggles in Pathways to Prevention. It is the framework around which we are building support for coalitions to overcome the difficulties of moving beyond cooperative partnerships to full collaboration between community agencies and schools. It is about transforming 'good practice' in the delivery of services to disadvantaged families into practices that are based on strong evidence – or at least the best available research on 'what works'.

### Is the use of science to help create environments for human flourishing a relatively new concept? What is being accomplished within this area?

It is not a new concept. One hundred and thirty years ago, Charles Booth was running extensive surveys of poverty as a way of generating data that could be used in the

development of better policies in the UK. For nearly as long, there has been an interest within criminology in early prevention and community crime prevention. However, it could be argued that only in recent years have various fields of science developed to the point where we can move ahead on firm foundations.

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. In crime policy, there is an enormous emphasis on punishment and imprisonment that is not based on evidence. Furthermore, there is little funding for prevention practices that focus on good research and evidence. Whether these are situational, environmental or early prevention approaches does not matter – it's the evidence about 'what works' that is important. We therefore need to do a lot more.

### What do you hope to achieve in the coming years?

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 forms of prevention as well).





# Prevent the crime before its time

An innovative research programme for tackling crime prevention is currently underway at **Griffith University**, Australia. The Creating Pathways to Prevention project works to strengthen the development system with a long-term view to reducing crime rates

**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT** are two words that are inextricably paired within the English lexicon. For many, a criminal justice system that is not punitive would be no justice system at all. And yet the efficacy of such systems is limited, as evidenced by high levels of crime and recidivism. Indeed, an estimated 60 per cent of prisoners currently serving time in Australia have served at least one previous custodial sentence. Moreover, a significant number of these individuals will also have a record of criminal, antisocial or delinquent behaviour tracing back to adolescence.

According to Professor Ross Homel, Foundation Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University, the time is ripe to reframe the way communities approach the social problem of crime, moving focus away from punishment and towards prevention. Specifically, his aim is to foster environments in which individuals, particularly children and young people at risk of developing criminal behaviours, can flourish and succeed. "We need to strengthen the developmental system – the web of institutions, relationships and primary care settings that shape, and are shaped by, children, young people and parents – locally and nationally," he enthuses. "This way, we can 'head off' youth crime or antisocial behaviours before they start."

To guide such an advance, research is required to identify best practices. This is where Creating Pathways to Prevention comes in. Through this research programme, Homel – alongside his colleagues Drs Kate Freiberg and Sara Branch – is working to provide the scientific evidence needed to reshape policy pathways and improve support for young people and their families. In doing so, the researchers hope to bring about

measurable, positive change to the lives of society's most vulnerable citizens, while also contributing to crime reduction.

## PROGRESSING ALONG THE PATHWAY

Creating Pathways to Prevention has naturally progressed from the previous Pathways to Prevention project – a collaborative endeavour involving Griffith University, Mission Australia and Education Queensland. Initiated in 2002, this comprehensive early intervention project was brought to some of Queensland's most disadvantaged areas. During its decade-long duration, Pathways to Prevention was awarded first prize in the 2004 National Crime and Violence Prevention Awards, and also played an influential role in the development of Communities for Children, a large-scale Australian Government programme.

Arguably one of the most important project outputs has been the resulting longitudinal database of child outcomes. Including data from nearly 5,000 children between the ages of four and 12 – gathered via interviews, testing of children, Department of Education records and case studies – this database provides an unprecedented wealth of long-term data. The central aim of Homel's most recent Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project, entitled 'Crime, poverty and early prevention: A longitudinal study of

social and development pathways to wellbeing through the Pathways to Prevention Project', is to analyse these data and add official youth justice data for the original preschool cohort (2002-03). So far, the findings appear positive.

## CREATING A COMMUNITY PREVENTION MODEL

Another important component of Creating Pathways to Prevention is the 'Collaborative, Relationships-driven, Early in the pathway, Accountable, Training-focused, Evidence-driven' (CREATE) model of community prevention. It was developed in 2012 for the formulation of interrelated goals, roles, procedures and relationships within effective community collaboration. "Although as a set of principles CREATE is quite general, we are applying it to the problem of strengthening the developmental system in disadvantaged communities in order to achieve better measurable outcomes for children and young people," Homel explains.

Children's faces at a school window: Pathways to Prevention Project 2006.



## CREATING PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION

### OBJECTIVE

To reduce traffic down the pathway from social disadvantage to youth detention to prison, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### KEY COLLABORATORS

Griffith University, Australia: **Dr Kate Freiberg**, Griffith Criminology Institute; **Dr Sara Branch**, Griffith Criminology Institute and Griffith Institute of Educational Research; **Professor Clare Tilbury**, Life Without Barriers, Griffith School of Human Services and Social Work; **Emeritus Professor Neil Dempster**, Griffith Institute of Educational Research

**Dr Matthew Manning**, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Australia

Pennsylvania State University, USA: **Professor Mark Greenberg**, College of Health and Human Development; **Mr Brian Bumbarger**, Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center

### PARTNERS

**Australian Government Department of Social Services • New South Wales Department of Education & Communities • New South Wales Department of Families & Community Services • Queensland Department of Education and Training • Children's Health Queensland • Queensland Family and Child Commission • Mission Australia • The Australian Primary Principals' Association • The Smith Family • The Parenting Research Centre • Anglicare Tasmania • Salvation Army Australia • The Benevolent Society**

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**ROSS HOMEL** is Foundation Professor of Criminology at Griffith University. His passion is crime and violence prevention, for which he has won many awards. In

2008 he was appointed as an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia for his work in disadvantaged communities.

## CREATURE QUEST

**WHAT:** Creature Quest is a 25-minute interactive computer game that was developed within Pathways to Prevention (originally under the name Clowning Around).

**WHY:** The game validly and reliably measures the social-emotional wellbeing of children aged five to 12.

**HOW:** The child guides an avatar on a quest through the game's interactive landscape, accompanied by an animal companion. As they progress, the creature delivers test questions designed to obtain a detailed measure of the child's wellbeing and social-emotional skills. As they become closer, both to each other and the game's destination, the creature gradually transforms into a formidable ally.

**KEY BENEFITS:** Creature Quest enables children to self-report their wellbeing in a fun, engaging way, and thus provides a tool to better understand their needs. Since low social-emotional wellbeing is associated with behavioural problems, impulsivity, lack of self-control and poor academic achievement, improving children's social-emotional wellbeing is likely to generate significant benefits.

**APPLICATIONS:** As a multi-use tool, Creature Quest has applications across research, programme evaluation, needs assessment and responsive programme and policy planning. It can be applied at the individual, school or community level, and implemented in non-clinical settings. It has potential to be used as a social indicator at a national level of child wellbeing over time.

**WHAT NEXT?:** Creature Quest and its associated support modules will soon be disseminated via RealWell: Evaluating and Supporting Child Wellbeing (a not-for-profit enterprise within Griffith University). An adapted version of Creature Quest that is suitable for adolescents is planned, and work is underway to establish 'red flag' points on Creature Quest scores to indicate when a child may be in need of more detailed assessment.



Dr Kate Freiberg and the prototype creature.

CREATE has been put to use in an ARC Linkage Project entitled 'Creating the conditions for collective impact: Transforming the child-serving system in socially disadvantaged communities'. Bringing together NGOs and government partners, this project is focused on capacity building in participating Communities for Children sites.

### IMPROVING LIVES, REDUCING CRIME

Homel and his colleagues have high hopes for Creating Pathways to Prevention. "Within the next five to 10 years, we want to conduct a randomised controlled trial of the CREATE model," Homel reveals. There are also plans to publish further data analyses from Pathways to Prevention's longitudinal database (including outcomes such as fewer behavioural problems), and to expand the database to incorporate child protection administrative data.

Furthermore, a computer game called Creature Quest has been developed by Homel and Freiberg to measure children's social-emotional wellbeing. The potential applications for Creature Quest are numerous, and plans are now underway to adapt this game for adolescents.

In recognition of this groundbreaking work, Homel has been appointed an officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia, recognised as a 'Queensland Great', and bestowed the Sellin-Glueck Award by the American Society of Criminology.

While Homel is certainly proud of his acclaim, he is simply happy that his research is making an impact. "Our work is ultimately about changing systems – that's our non-negotiable bottom line," he states. "If we can't achieve better outcomes for young people, we have failed." With Homel and his colleagues making progress at an impressive rate, it seems possible that, in time, 'crime and prevention' may one day hold the same place on the English tongue as 'crime and punishment' currently does.

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