Police in schools—helpful or harmful? It depends on the model

February 15 2018, by Katherine J. Mclachlan

Earlier this month Victorian Opposition Leader, Matthew Guy, announced a plan to place 100 more police officers in schools. This included in 10 "at-risk" secondary schools to "tackle this violent scourge of youth crime, to keep Victorians safe."

The good news is it could be worse. He could have announced either boot camps for young offenders or a scared-straight program. Neither of these strategies work, and in fact can be more harmful than doing nothing at all. The bad news is that Guy, like many politicians, is using "tough on crime" promises to win votes.

So do police in schools programs work?

They can. Programs vary significantly around the world, and it follows their effectiveness varies too.

Tough on crime models don't reduce youth crime

In the US, following the 1999 Columbine fatal school shooting, there has been a significant increase in the number of police in schools. Despite their presence, there is little evidence to indicate the programs increase community safety. Case in point: the school shooting in Florida this week. As such, and like many US criminal justice responses, we should not rush to replicate them in Australia.

Armed police officers in schools potentially change the environment from one that fosters the academic and social development of children to a place under constant surveillance; one where adults expect the worst of the students rather than promote their best. For example, police in US schools have reportedly responded to classroom disciplinary matters using handcuffs and pepper spray.

This female student in the video above was reportedly using her mobile phone in a maths lesson.

Hard line approaches net-widen; identifying and criminalising children who otherwise would not come to the attention of the justice system. We know harsh punishments for early criminal behaviour increase the likelihood young people will continue to offend. We also know many children who "act out" have experienced significant trauma. A punitive police response is not going to promote their well-being or the safety of the community.

Community engagement programs can help at-risk youth

Research has found the British police in schools programs can work, where the focus is on the safety and education of young people. British models focused on early intervention, and building trust and rapport with young people and local communities.

A mixed-method evaluation of police in Scottish schools found the program can improve relationships between youth and the police. The evaluation also highlighted police officers in schools offered other benefits:

- better and more timely information sharing between agencies to

promote more effective child protection and welfare responses

- engagement in school based restorative justice and anti-bullying processes, and
- providing general justice and policing information and education to students.

Education staff felt it was particularly valuable for male police officers to develop positive relationships with at-risk male students who often had no father figures or pro-social male role models in their lives. One student said of their school-based officer: "Everybody respects him and you can sit there and have a carry on with him, as if he was one of your pals."

Unlike the US, UK officers don't carry guns. Equally, in the UK, the role of police in schools does not focus on addressing classroom disciplinary issues. Police use their powers for serious matters such as when students fight or are intoxicated.

What about current Australian programs?

Australian jurisdictions such as South Australia, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Queensland all have police in schools programs. Australian program goals are closer to those of UK models than US models, aiming to strengthen relationships between police and young people and contribute to safe and supportive learning environments.

How can we better spend money to reduce youth crime?

Let's be clear: there is no "scourge of youth crime" in Victoria. To say so is to try to scare voters into supporting tough on crime policies. According to the Victorian Crime Statistics Agency, there has been a

reduction in both the number of [young offenders](#) and the recorded crime committed by young people between 2007-2008 and 2015-2016.

But, putting this aside, if the Victorian Opposition (or indeed any political party) wish to make meaningful election promises to address youth offending and get value for their investment dollars, they could instead invest A$50 million in [restorative justice conferencing](#), [therapeutic alternative care models](#) and [mentoring](#).

In fact, one [Australian study](#) found the cost of mentoring 2,200 at-risk [young people](#) was estimated at A$40 million over three years. This would well and truly offset the cost of their predicted adult offending, which is A$3.3 billion.

Given the [Scottish police in schools model](#) cost roughly A$3.5 million annually (covering the wages of 55 officers in 65 schools), it would be possible with the balance of A$10 million for the Victorian government to fund an effective policing program in Victorian schools and still have change.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

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