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THE RISK DISCOURSE & CRIME PREVENTION AS THEY RELATE TO NESB YOUNG PEOPLE:

In today's presentation, I intend to explore some of the implications of the risk discourse in the context of this paradigm being the current and dominant approach to crime prevention and its potential impacts on NESB young people.

From the outset, I wish to make it explicitly clear that NESB young people are not a homogeneous group, so therefore, what may or may not work regarding crime prevention with one ethnic community, may be different to what potentially needs to occur within others.

Risk factors such as those described in the current Commonwealth Governments Pathways to Prevention Report 1999 are very much based around individual and/or family discrepancies. I find this very concerning given that interventions and programs are based around these pre-summed risk factors being associated with antisocial and/or criminal behaviour. It feels to me like we are blaming the victim rather than social and/or structural inequalities.

We are also reinforcing stereotypes. This can be seen in the pathways report in the section on family factors associated with antisocial and/or criminal behaviour. In this section, risky parental or family factors include being a teenage mother, being a single parent, marital discord, disorganized family environments, father absence and low involvement in a child's activities. It sounds like we are beginning to promote the concept of the partridge family once again.

Besides which, I do not believe that such risk factors relate to all cultures, and is therefore enforcing the views of the dominant culture onto others. For example, who measures or

defines what a disorganized family environment might be? Indeed, in cultures where extended family play a significant role in the upbringing of a child or children around many family members may seem to an outsider to be very spontaneous or disorganized, but however, this can be perfectly normal and healthy as far as that family may be concerned. Yet, we still feel comfortable enforcing what the dominant culture views as a normal or functional and well-organised family onto others with different beliefs and approaches. This begs the question of whether or not the social engineers who developed such definitions took into account the many and diverse forms of family environments in Australia, and especially those in culturally diverse families? It seems that they have measured a well-organised Anglo-Australian family unit against culturally diverse family units and decided that the Anglo-Australian family way is the best way?

Other risk factors I find concerning are those associated with children. For instance, the Pathways to Prevention Report articulates prematurity and low birth weight as risk factors associated with antisocial and/or criminal behaviour. How can we as policy developers and/or practitioners begin to conceptualize these risk factors as pertinent across all communities in Queensland or Australia? Surely the fact that you as a child may have been born prematurely, with a disability, with low intelligence (again who determines what low intelligence is?), or have been unfortunate enough to have developed a pre-natal brain injury, does not mean that you are more susceptible to antisocial behaviour or a career in criminality than any other child!

This kind of approach also concerns me regarding the influence it has on the development of policies, services and/or programs. Early intervention of course, has been heralded as

the most appropriate approach to crime prevention in Australia. I do not agree, especially if interventions are based around the identification and targeting of those young people with risk factors in their life that may correlate with some of those articulated in Pathways to Prevention. This is nothing short of reinforcing stereotypes and myths about certain groups.

Besides, why wait to intervene in a young persons life until such a time that issues that are PREVENTABLE have manifested or began to manifest? There is not enough focus on prevention. Lets eradicate poverty, unemployment, racism, dis-connectedness and white collar crime before we unduly target certain communities and groups because they are deemed to be at risk. Of course, within a preventative framework there is certainly scope for early intervention programs. However, prevention would break the cycle of disadvantage so issues we want to intervene in now would not manifest for people in the future on the same scale, as presently is the case.

Regarding policy, if we allow rigid scientifically based work such as pathways to prevention to influence and inform policy development, then I believe we have missed the mark. What we need is to incorporate much greater cultural flexibility into policy to ensure that policies are flexible enough to cope with diversity. This may mean that we need to account for diversity in policies by recognising that belief systems and values held by many in the community derive from many different perspectives and cultural frameworks. Policy development based around rigid risk factors will not work because it does not reflect the experiences of many people in our communities.

Take the fact that the Office of Youth Affairs – the lead government agency in youth affairs – located in the

Department of Families Youth Ana Community Care, currently do not have a coordinated strategy to address the needs of NESB young people in Queensland. This reflects the lack of cultural flexibility in policy development because it is assumed that what is already out there in the community will meet the needs of NESB young people. However, this is not entirely true, which is reflected in the fact that we are still grappling with access and equity issues in service delivery with NESB young people who are not accessing services even though evidence suggests that they may need to – this is because we have not recognised the special needs of this group of young people through policy and service delivery and have expected them to fit in with what we already have. Hopefully when OYA finally decide to develop a NESB Youth Strategy they do not incorporate programs based on risk factors articulated in the pathways report, but rather, seek to influence a paradigm shift in service delivery and policy development.

The pathways report also concerns me because it fails to identify structural disadvantage as a precursor to many social issues experienced by NESB young people. Take for example the English as a second Language Program which is designed to facilitate the development of newly arrived migrants English language skills to a level where they are able to integrate into the mainstream education system in a way that ensures they will be given the opportunity to reach their full scholastic potential. In Queensland this program is severely under resourced in comparison to other states who fund the program by matching the commonwealth contribution on a dollar for dollar basis. In Queensland, the commonwealth allocates 7.2 million dollars, the state Education department about 1 and a half million – a long way short of matching the commonwealths contribution. Yet, what this means for many newly arrived young people, is a distinct lack of any opportunity to reach

their scholastic potential – this can then have the effect of disadvantaging these young people throughout their lifespan because they posses poor English language skills – this then effects them in securing employment and higher education opportunities, and so the cycle continues. Why don't we put energy and resources into preventing disadvantage before it occurs, which then of course, creates less willingness and opportunity for people to offend.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my concern regarding the risk discourse as the dominant paradigm in crime prevention in Queensland and Australia. Such scientifically based theories in my view are based around pejorative perceptions of human nature and human behaviour that attempt to categorize experiences in a rigid format. I would argue that the risk discourse does not account for the range of experiences of Anglo-Australian young people never mind the range of experiences relating to NESB young people who as I have mentioned earlier, often aspire and live within and through diverse belief systems and frameworks. Youth culture and sub-culture needs to be examined more closely if we are ever going to connect with and varied young people in our community.

If we begin to develop preventative programs that break the cycle of disadvantage experienced by many in our communities, eradicate poverty, address the serious antisocial and criminal behaviour commonly known as white collar crime, and incorporate much greater cultural flexibility in policy development and service delivery, and address structural disadvantage and inequality then we might begin to tackle the issue of crime in a real and holistic way.

Government and bureaucracy need to give power back to communities through resources and support to assist them in

building strong, resilient, and resourceful places where all are respected and valued.

I would suggest that this might then prevent crime.