

# JustComment

A publication of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education

## Youth Justice

### Is Youth Crime Getting out of Hand?

Each night, especially on weekends, commercial news carries images of young people and crime. But how bad is youth crime? And if so, what type of offences are being committed? What factors are causing this increase in youth crime? Is it really getting out of hand?

### Is Youth Crime Rising?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics from 2019 to 2021, there was a general downward trend in youth crime in most states. But since 2022, we have seen a definite rise (6% increase) in youth crime in all states compared to a similar period a decade earlier in 2009-10. Current trend data suggests that it will continue to rise. However we need to bear in mind that despite these trends youth crime accounts for less than 20% of all crimes in Australia. The majority of crime is committed by people over 17 years.

### What is the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility?

The minimum age of criminal responsibility is ten years in most states and territories, except the Northern Territory which recently raised the age to 12 and the ACT which has raised it to 14 years. Victoria will raise it to 12 years by the end of 2024. Young people between the ages of 10 and 13 can only be held responsible if it is proved they knew what they were doing. "Youth crime" in this paper refers to those offences committed by 10- to 17-year-olds.

### What Offences are Youth Committing?

Up until 2021, most offences committed by youth in Australia were "against property" ie graffiti, vandalism, shoplifting. However, in recent years, there has been a new pattern of crime starting to emerge. Since 2022, across the country, we are seeing a sharp rise in different types of youth crime including break and enter, car theft, robbery and aggravated burglaries.

New South Wales has reported high incidents of theft, fraud, break and enter, and driving offences. In regional NSW alone in the 5-year period from 2018 to 2023, there was a 179% increase in car thefts. In



Queensland, from 2022 until 2023 there has been a 7.3 per cent increase in youth offenses with 147,074 cases of unlawful entry in 2023- the highest levels reported since 2001. Youth were also responsible for more than 53% of all stolen cars.

Victoria has also seen an 8.1% increase in youth crime from 2021 to 2022-23 with a sharp rise in the number of burglaries and car thefts involving luxury cars. Of particular concern are the incidents of violent crime "against the person" especially aggravated assault and the increasing number of offences committed by youth under the age of 14 years. Break and enters and car theft committed by youth are on the rise in every state.

### What are the Patterns of Crime

It is important to point out that most youth in groups or gangs are not involved with crime. Thus the stereotype of a 'gang member' being synonymous with 'criminal' is a falsehood perpetuated often by the media or politicians with an interest in prosecuting a law and order agenda and/or election campaign. The Australian Journal of Criminology Report on Youth Violence and Gangs has shown that youth gang membership does not, in most cases, lead to crime. However, exposure to some gangs may heighten possibilities for some "at risk" young people. In general, most youth offences

***“Sensationalised news reporting about something the public thinks is an issue reinforces the public sentiment...”*** Professor Hickey

tend to involve one or two teenagers committing one-off, spur of the moment thefts or break-ins.

Older youth (15-17) often target shops and homes with luxury items such as computers or luxury cars. These crimes take place in the wealthy suburbs or businesses in large cities like Sydney, Melbourne, or Brisbane. In some cases, the youth may work in partnership with older criminals who run a black market in expensive items such as high-end cars.

For younger teenagers (9-15) the offences are more commonly quick smash and grab burglaries and break-ins. They typically target small businesses or shops like 7 Eleven stores, late-night service stations and newsagencies. Often, they are simply after the cash. Sometimes the offence could be a prank to annoy people. They are not highly organized, but some break-ins have involved knives and have led to violent assaults when challenged.

Car theft for younger teens (9-15) is also on the rise. In this type of crime, youth seem to be focusing on cars such as older Holdens for the thrill of a high-speed joyride. Sadly, the theft has sometimes resulted in deaths or injuries to themselves and, worse still, to innocent people. Car theft has been experiencing a very sharp and worrying increase since 2020.

## What is causing the Rise in Youth Crime?

What is causing this new trend in these types of crime by young offenders? One factor may be the increased prevalence and usage of social media as a catalyst and amplifier of youth crime. Some studies claim the lockdown experience of Covid from 2019-2021 led some youth to increasingly use social media to plan and commit crimes. NSW police claim the spike in car thefts is because young people view car theft as “a cat and mouse game” to bait police. “Posting and Boasting” is a relatively new phenomenon where young offenders live stream their attempts at crimes especially car chases with police, later posting and

bragging on social accounts like TikTok on how they “beat the cops.”

Commercial media also plays a very significant role by its reporting of youth crime and portrayal of the extent of the situation. Car chases make for great optics and attract sensational coverage. The constant highlighting of these images in the commercial news has fuelled community anger and fear that there is a “youth crime wave” and that “it is out of control.”

Professor Hickey from University of Southern Queensland from his research, claims the issue of youth crime is media enflamed and creates a loop for more news, “What we’re seeing with the ‘crime crisis’ in Queensland is this has become real in the public imagination, even if the statistics tell us crime rates are on the decline. Sensationalised news reporting about something the public thinks is an issue reinforces the public sentiment, which then reinforces the necessity for further news about this issue.”

In summary, most crime in Australia is committed by adults, not youth. Yes, youth crime is seeing a dramatic rise in specific types of crimes that are often dangerous. The problems with youth crime are real and need to be addressed. Everyone in the community needs to feel safe. But the extent of youth crime is sometimes exaggerated by the media. Getting evidence-based research on the data and facts is the first step in addressing the problem to develop effective, long-term strategies and solutions that will benefit the whole community.

*(This is a discussion paper that looks at key facts and trends in youth crime. It is not an exhaustive or thorough study.)*

## Discussion Points

- 1. What are the basic human rights of young offenders that need to be considered by the justice system?**
- 2. What are the 3 key principles of Catholic Social Teaching that need to be considered when we make decisions for young people in the justice system?**
- 3. What is the difference between “preventative policies” compared to “re-active policies”?**



**Edmund Rice Centre**  
AWARENESS ■ ADVOCACY ■ ACTION

2 Thames Street, PO BOX 34  
Balmain NSW 2041  
**Email** [alatukeyfu@edmundrice.org](mailto:alatukeyfu@edmundrice.org)  
**Tel** +61 2 8762 4201  
**Mob** +61 4 66 028 196  
**Web** [www.edmundricecommunityservices.org](http://www.edmundricecommunityservices.org)

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