

## **The Role of the Employment Access Program Within the Juvenile Justice System**

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The purpose of work in our society cannot be over estimated. Work is inextricably tied to many aspects of life. It plays a significant part in building self esteem and identity. It validates our place within our community and enables us to mix with a wide range of people. It also provides monetary rewards that increase independence and improves access to goods and services. For young offenders, employment also plays an important role in integrating them back into the community and decreasing the likelihood of re-offending.

Young offenders are one of the most marginalised groups in society. They tend to have a history of long term unemployment, with a poor strike rate in terms of gaining and maintaining employment. They are one of the highest unemployed groups in the country. The unemployment rate for 15-21 year olds is estimated to be 60% (Griffith's, The History and Experience Of The Employment Access Program, 1998) several times the national average. This dilemma is compounded by the decreased number of full time jobs for young people in Australia. Over the past 5 years, employment has dropped by 33% for males and by 50% for females. Over 20 years more than 350,000 full-time teenage jobs have disappeared.

Decline in employment opportunities in traditional entry level positions and the rise of qualifications required for employment, places an increased hardship on young offenders. Disappearing employment options of the past, ie the manual, unskilled/semi-skilled jobs, that acted as a safety net for young offenders, exacerbates their situation.

The 1992 Carmichael Report states that, "disadvantaged young people who do not participate in education or employment, encounter extreme difficulties".

*These young people are at considerable risk of not making an effective transition to adult independence. They are at risk of never gaining full time employment, of being confined either to part time, casual or intermittent labour markets or to dependence on social security for large periods of their life"*

The over representation of young offenders who are unemployed is overwhelming. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between employment and crime prevention. There is a considerable amount of evidence that indicates employment significantly reduces the rate of offending. Being employed has a direct impact on behaviour and attitudes of young offenders. (Studies show that a young offender is 3-5 times more likely to re-offend than an employed offender.)

The first agency responsible for labour market programs in Victoria - The Victorian Employment Committee, was established in 1979. The Ministry of Employment and Training followed in 1980 as part of the Government's recognition of the needs of disadvantaged groups in the employment market. In 1982 the Cabinet approved and funded the Victorian Employment Strategy. However, young offenders were not specifically incorporated into these state wide programs. This deficiency was recognised and addressed in 1985 with the formation of the Employment Access Program (EAP). The program was jointly funded by the Department of Labour (DOL) and Community Services Victoria (CSV), and was formally established in September 1985.

Employment Access Program rationale originally emanated from the recognition that young offenders are particularly disadvantaged in the labour market. A number of social, personal, economic and environmental factors adversely effect the employability of the target group, particularly those who have been institutionalised. Thus the aim of the program is to effect long term improvement to the labour market options available to the target group and reduce the likelihood of (re)offending. EAP tackles the structural barriers that inhibit equal opportunities and outcomes. The program recognises the potential of employment to raise a young person's self esteem and increase their independence.

The Criminology Department of the University of Melbourne completed a comprehensive evaluation of the EAP program in July 1988. The Evaluation found the advocacy component of the program and its impact on recidivism impressive.

*“The clear accomplishments of EAP (job placements and training etc) and the particular observation that those who hold onto their jobs are likely to stay out of trouble suggests that efforts like EAP should occupy a central place within the strategies designed to meet this significant target group.” (Evaluation Report 1988)*

The Government, encouraged by the positive findings of the evaluation, followed its recommendations and in September 1988 announced the state wide expansion of the EAP program. An Employment Access Officer was placed in each of the 16 CSV regions, with centralised coordination.

EAP was relocated to the Department of Labour in 1990 to consolidate the range of employment programs managed by the State Government. In the context of closures of other state run employment programs, EAP moved back to the Department of Human Services (DHS), within the Juvenile Justice Section, in 1993.

It was argued at the time that EAP needed to be strategically repositioned to meet the needs of the target group. It allowed for the reintegration of EAP with DHS programs, staff and supervision services. Today the regional Juvenile Justice Units have responsibility for the operational management of EAP. Strategic direction and policy development are provided by the Juvenile Justice Section of Youth and Family Services.

The Children and Young Person’s Act 1989 (C&YP Act, 1989) provides the statutory framework for the Victorian Government for the care, supervision and protection of the target group. Within the Department of Human Services’ (DHS) Division of Youth and Family Services (YAFS), the Juvenile Justice Section is responsible for the development of policy and programs for young offenders detained in Custodial Centres or supervised in community-based Juvenile Justice Units. EAP is one such program, which is part of the broader diversionary process.

The strategic partnership between EAP and Youth and Family Services/Client Services Program achieves a number of vital points. The partnership allows for greater responsiveness and brings together complementary skills, experience and assets, maximising cross-functional services within the department.

EAP is strategically positioned to address the employment and training needs of its clients. EAP Coordinators knowledge of the court system and their integration within the department as members of staff, gives them direct access to key resources and workers related to the target group.

The program therefore takes a pro-active approach to the labour market needs of clients. EAP is not confined to employment placement and retention but is extended to examining the structural barriers that restrict opportunities and outcomes for the target group.

The EAP objectives are:

- To increase the placement and retention of clients in employment, education and training.
- To provide vocational counselling, information and support to the target group.
- To advocate for clients.
- To provide labour market and vocational consultancy to individuals and organisations working with the target group.
- To contribute to the development of programs and policies which the employment and training opportunities for young people.

Disadvantaged young people require specific responses to their complex employment barriers. The EAP endeavours to address these barriers by promoting the needs of the target group and challenging social myths eg; young offenders are generally treated as a welfare group rather than a group of unemployed workers, an attitude which further erodes the target groups capacity for employment.

The program is based on the need for specific policies and measures that assists young people to achieve their potential in the work force. The program provides an employment advocacy, counselling, support and resourcing service for its target group.

The program ensures that labour market opportunities available to young people do not exclude the target group.

The program's focus is (re)integrating a group of young people into long-term mainstream employment and training opportunities. For example, a short-term training, education or work-experience placement may be a precondition to employment and widening a young person's occupational choices.

The social profile of clients includes minimal income support and risk of long term unemployment. Experience shows that EAP clients enter the labour market with poor literacy and numeracy skills, lack an understanding of work ethos, negative educational experiences, limited work history and narrow career options. Consequently, the target group experience negative effects to their self esteem and motivation. They tend to have poor social skills and underdeveloped problem solving abilities.

The young people who constitute a large percentage of the Employment Access

Program's client group are:

- Age group 15-19, with a high percentage of males registered.
- Most Juvenile Justice clients have extensive histories of marginal or non-school attendance. They frequently hold negative attitudes towards schools, have experienced repeated 'failure' in mainstream education and have literacy and numeracy difficulties.
- Many of these young people, particularly those aged between 15-17 years, do not have sufficient maturity of life experience to make choices and commitments about vocational options. It is important, therefore, to maximise their education opportunities.
- Many are substance abusers.
- The majority of these young people exhibit extremely low self esteem due to a sense of continuing 'failures'. - unemployment, personal relationships, school, financial, family, social, etc.
- Poor social skills - eg; communication, conflict resolution, anger management, recognition of social responsibilities, and consequences for actions, etc. due to lack of positive community involvement through school, social groups and sporting clubs, etc.

- Inability to sustain long-term commitments,. eg; relationships, employment placements, training/education, etc.

Many clients have extensive offending histories, unstable or severely damaged family relationships and may have experienced incarceration, alternative care or substance abuse. Clients are often stigmatised by employers, government departments, training organisations and the community because of their correctional or protective care background.

These young people must be provided with opportunities to contribute to their communities, their school, their family and their peers. It has become increasingly evident that the educational system can play a vital role in a young offenders life, especially in terms of status and achievement (Prins 1973). The argument that Prins puts forward is that status deprivation at school may be linked to student delinquent behaviour. Prins suggests that young people compete for status on many fronts. Continual failure to gain positive recognition at school often leads students to feel that they have been relegated to a low status position, resulting in insecurity and frustration. For some the solution to their status problem may be found in anti-social behaviour. Being marginal from society, in this case the education system, is among the complex range of factors which may lead to criminal behaviour.

Introducing TAFE services into JJC's has maximised the ability of young offenders to undertake accredited training, acquire vocational skills, meet their literacy, numeracy and educational needs, and improve their options to gain employment or further education on their release from custody.

TAFE campuses have been established by Broadmeadows TAFE at Melbourne JJC and by Loddon Campus TAFE at Malmsbury JJC. Young women at Parkville Youth Residential Centre also receive TAFE services. Young offenders in custody at Parkville YRC, aged 10-14 years, continue to receive education programs from staff of the Directorate of School Education.

While TAFE courses are primarily being provided to young offenders on-site at the JJC, there is also the capacity for young offenders to attend TAFE colleges or other vocational training programs in the community, where appropriate.

Complementary TAFE and JJC programs link with Client Services Planning to ensure time spent in detention is productive, and to promote effective transition into the community on release. TAFE services for young offenders in JJC's are monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis, and future plans will fill any gaps in services, upgrade training facilities, and build on demonstrated successes

Maximising labour market opportunities is a key element of EAP. Prospects are enhanced by providing job search preparation, consultancy, resources, career counselling and advocacy for the vocational needs of clients. EAP coordinators play a critical role in identifying and addressing structural barriers to employment by raising the profile and issues confronting the target group to DHS and labour market policy makers.

Coordinators ensure that clients are not excluded from mainstream services and provide assistance to clients when accessing them eg: employment services, income support, labour market programs, TAFE, training providers, schools, community organisations and employer groups. Post placement support is provided to clients, enhancing retention rates.

EAP Coordinators do not have any statutory relationship with the target group. Overriding placement consideration is voluntary participation, based on the principle of empowering young people to develop their decision-making capacities through an awareness of employment and vocational options. The program operates on the fundamental belief that young people have the right to work, education and job training. Their participation in the labour market, assisted by EAP , is of their own choice.

It has become increasingly evident that the target group needs strategies and services that focus on the provision of labour market opportunities. Documented concerns and consequences of continued growth in unemployment have been realised. The proportion of teenagers in work has plummeted from 58.2% to 16.9% in 1993 (Freehand 1994). This continued rise in unemployment has adversely affected the target group. A number of academics have correlated this increase with a concomitant rise in youth crime (Polk 1997, White 1997, Coventry 1994)

*“..the absence of a wage or other income will result in various forms of innovative income distribution which the community is more likely to define as household burglary and shop stealing.” (Polk, 1994)*

EAP’s endeavour centres on improving the scope for gaining skills, credentials and Employment that will lead clients to a productive work life. Their personal success will need to encompass work that is meaningful and valued by society. Furthermore, employment performs a vital function for the target group, especially in terms of status, independence and recidivism.

The program has maintained its relevance and integrity over its history and continues to be an important Victorian Department of Human Services program. EAP reflects and addresses many of the aspects outlined in current research that are essential for effective service delivery.