Blazing the developmental trail

In response to Richard Hil’s critique titled ‘Beating the developmental path’ in *Youth Studies Australia*, v.18, n.4, Ross Homel expands on the origins and intellectual history of the report, *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*. He distinguishes the pathways model from other approaches to early intervention, particularly those based on the latency model and the risk factor paradigm; and where others suggest focusing on the history of criminology, the social construction of “crime” and the origin of crime control, Homel argues for the value of utilising developmental research to guide the design of intervention programs.

The Pathways to Prevention report, which was commissioned by National Crime Prevention and written by the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (DCPC 1999a,b,c), has attracted a great deal of attention since its release. It was favourably received by academics, policy-makers and practitioners in fields as diverse as adolescent mental health, child protection, social work, education, early childhood, youth work, public health, pediatrics, addictions, urban renewal, juvenile justice and crime prevention. The most negative reactions have come from a small number of academic criminologists and sociologists who see in the approach we advocate a serious threat to social justice. It is argued that, among its many failings, a developmental framework is theoretically incoherent, it opens the gates to an intensification of state interference in the lives of the socially marginalised, and it pathologises nonconforming young people through risk management and selective control strategies.

These are serious matters, especially since we rather thought that in our report we were able to demonstrate how developmental prevention not only promotes social justice but provides an intellectually coherent and evidence-based framework for thinking in creative ways about prevention. It seems that not all readers have seen the issues in the way we intended. In preparing these remarks, I have consulted with consortium members and considered all the points raised by my colleagues. While I believe this paper does not misrepresent their views, I have nevertheless drawn heavily on my personal experience, reading and research. Indeed, this article is somewhat autobiographical in style – an approach that I hope is deemed compatible with developmental methodologies! No doubt other consortium members, building on their own disciplines and experience, would express some points differently or emphasise other aspects of our work.

**Developmental theorists**

Nearly 20 years ago I was privileged to hear a lecture by the eminent American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner. The paper, ‘Children and families 1981: The silent revolution’, discussed ideas developed in more detail in his influential book, *The Ecology of Human Development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). His main theme, at a time when the Reagan era (and the challenge from Japanese car makers!) had only just begun, was that:

... the unthinking exercise of massive technological power, and an unquestioned acquiescence to the demands of industrialisation and administrative organisation, can unleash forces which, if left unbridled, can destroy the human ecology – the social fabric that
nurtures and sustains our capacity to live and work together effectively, to raise children and youth to become competent and compassionate members of our society, and to manufacture motor cars that do not have to be recalled. (Bronfenbrenner 1981, p.1)

He went on to outline four basic environmental conditions for human development, and to demonstrate how these conditions were being eroded in American society. He highlighted the combined impact on family structure and parenting practices of a corporate and industrial culture hostile to the needs of families, and of social and welfare policies based on a “deficit model” that stigmatised and punished the victims of an uncar ing economic system. Among other “preposterous proposals”, he recommended new policies (with more input from more women appointed to influential positions) based on the need “to create formal support systems that generate and strengthen informal support systems, that in turn reduce the need for formal systems” (Bronfenbrenner 1981, p.23).

I have thought a lot about Bronfenbrenner’s writings in the ensuing years, and have done my best to keep up with the rapidly growing literature on human development, at least as it relates to ecological processes, social inequality and social problems. I have found the work of Bronfenbrenner’s student, James Garbarino, particularly useful since he has effectively linked developmental research with theory and policy in the areas of child protection and adolescent violence. In an elaboration and updating of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, Garbarino argues that despite improvements in specific problems like sexism and racism, “the quality of the social environment for children has deteriorated to a degree that I believe it is appropriate to speak of a ‘socially toxic environment‘” (Garbarino 1995, p.3). He shows how this growing toxicity is linked to the “monetarisation” of daily life, and more generally to economic deprivation and the “struggle of affluence” (Garbarino 1995, p.17).

Most recently, Daniel Keating and Clyde Hertzman (1999a), in their book Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations, have highlighted the malign impact of steepening social gradients on the overall health and well-being of industrialised countries, especially the United States. They use the term “developmental health” to describe not only physical and mental health but also a wide range of other developmental outcomes, from behavioural adjustment (including crime), to literacy and to mathematics achievement. The “social gradient” is a similarly broad concept encompassing not only inequalities of wealth and income but also the “social distance” between members of the population and the distribution of social capital.
The starting point for their book is the consistent findings from empirical research that in any community or nation the social gradient is monotonically related to a very wide range of developmental outcomes, and that societies and regions with shallow social gradients do better overall in terms of these outcomes. It is not just a matter of the very poor versus the very rich, with a null relationship among the broad mass of working and middle-class people. On the contrary, health and well-being in all its dimensions is worst for those at the very bottom, a bit better for those a little more advantaged, and so on up the social hierarchy.

**Latency and pathways models**

Keating, Hertzman and their colleagues explore two partially conflicting models to explain how social circumstances systematically affect developmental trajectories. The essence of the “latency” model is “an opportunity to develop a competence which occurs at a discrete and unique time in (early) life, and has a lifelong impact on well-being, independent of intervening experience” (Hertzman 1999, p.34). This means that if some vital kinds of development do not take place at critical periods in very early childhood, it is “all over”, regardless of later events. Typically, these vital developments occur through a process of “biological embedding” whereby the social and physical environments of the infant shape the networks and patterns of the brain. In contrast to the latency model, the pathways model “emphasises the cumulative effect of life events and the reinforcing effects of differing psychosocial and socioeconomic circumstances throughout the life cycle” (Keating & Hertzman 1999b, p.8). This model opens up the possibility of interventions to modify core developmental processes not only before birth or in early childhood but also later in life, and especially at key transition points between life phases.

As reflected in its title, we leaned strongly to the pathways model in our report. Without denying the importance of early childhood experiences and the impact of the environment on early brain development, we explicitly rejected the notion that “if at first you don’t succeed, you don’t succeed” (DCPC 1999b, p.83). Moreover, we attempted to paint on a broad canvas, emphasising the complex and reciprocal interactions over the life course between social context and the behaviours of individuals. In this view, the larger environment of neighbourhood and society is as important as individual level processes. As Hertzman (1999, p.36) observes, the latency model invites “magic bullet” solutions highly focused in time and specific in content. “Deeper challenges to the nature of society can be blissfully ignored.” The pathways model, by contrast, leads to the prying open of social policy questions from cradle to grave and the pursuit of a broad agenda of social reform.

**Risk factors, protective factors and resilience**

The pathways perspective, in the broad form we have espoused it, is not universally accepted as persuasive or practical by those in the “early intervention” field. For example, in his Presidential Address to the American Society of Criminology in November 1999, David Farrington – undoubtedly the most prolific and influential proponent of developmental approaches in criminology – advocated a more restricted view of developmental prevention centred around the risk factor paradigm. This involves identifying the key risk factors for offending, and implementing prevention methods designed to counteract them (Farrington, in press). Imported into criminology from medicine and public health by pioneers such as David Hawkins and Rick Catalano (1992) in the Communities That Care program, the risk factor paradigm has had, as Farrington observes, an enormous influence in criminology in the 1990s. Highly visible and easily understood community health interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of problems like heart disease or AIDS make the risk factor paradigm attractive to practitioners and policy-makers. Farrington is even cautious about the explanatory value of the newer concept of protective factors, suggesting that these are often just the flip side of risk factors, and that researchers have not been able to identify protective effects without corresponding risk effects.

Our formulation of developmental prevention in Pathways does incorporate the “traditional” research on risk factors but, as noted, also strongly emphasises concepts related to time and timing and to social context. These concepts include, obviously, the metaphor of pathways, but also the ideas of transition points and life phases, and the developmental processes involved in mastering the tasks that children and young people typically face during these socially-imposed life phases. As researchers, we want to know more about the processes that link experiences at Time 1 with behaviours at Time 2, and how continuities and discontinuities in social contexts over time relate to individual modes of adaptation. We want to know much more about how the pathways followed by boys differ from those followed by girls (especially following interventions), and how and why variations are mediated by ethnicity and race.

We are more impressed than is Farrington by the emerging literature on protective factors and resilience, and reported that those interested in prevention might do better to identify and strengthen protective factors than to dwell exclusively on risk factors or on risk management. In a recent paper completed with another group of colleagues (Homel, Lincoln & Herd 1999), I introduce the concept of...
"meta-risk and protective factors" in Indigenous communities in an attempt to construct a framework within which the impact of unique aspects of Aboriginal history, culture and social structure on children and families can be better understood. These meta-factors include the risk factors of forced removals, dependence, institutionalised racism, substance abuse and cultural practices that create conflict both within communities and with the criminal justice system. Interrelated protective factors include cultural resilience, personal controls and family control measures.

A pathways prevention model
Developmental prevention – like life – is unavoidably complex. It cannot be easily reduced to neat formulas or expressed in terms of a single elegant theoretical model. The best we can do at the moment is to emphasise the key features of our prevention model. These involve:

* intervention before major problems manifest themselves; this may mean at an early age (say, under three), or it may mean at an older age but early in the pathway leading to crime or to further entanglement with the criminal justice system;
* investment in “child friendly” institutions and communities, including reductions in harmful institutional reactions to “problem behaviours” (such as automatic expulsion from school for the first offence of smoking marijuana);
* the reduction of multiple risk factors and the strengthening of multiple protective factors in several contexts (family, school, peer group, child-care centre) and at crucial transition points, such as around birth, or the transition from primary to high school;
* the implementation of adequately resourced programs for a sustained period, followed by “booster shots” at later times;
* the empowerment of communities so that interventions to change “problem pathways” eventually occur without “outside intervention”;
* the creation and maintenance of social policies that strengthen mainstream developmental institutions and make them more responsive to the needs of families, children and young people, especially those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

Report requirements
Anyone assessing our report should also bear in mind that we had quite specific tasks set by National Crime Prevention. We won a national competitive tender in mid-1997, and were required (in 16 weeks) to:

1. Review the literature on early intervention or developmental approaches to crime prevention, with a view to clarifying the nature of this approach and its applicability to Australian society.
2. Carry out an audit of existing social and health services in Australia, and also of innovative interventions that enhance or go beyond existing services; then evaluate these services and interventions in the light of the literature review.
3. Formulate a policy framework for the improvement and evaluation of existing services and interventions, and a framework for the development, implementation, management and evaluation of a pilot intervention that builds on or enhances existing services.

We were not, therefore, free to write a theoretical discourse or a history of the child-saving movement, even if we had had the time to do so. We were also bound to attempt a comprehensive review of the literature, which meant including documents with theoretical bases which were not particularly in sympathy with our own.

Richard Hill (1999) accuses us of a “pathological emphasis” on the basis of the documents included and not included in our bibliography. He argues that our pathological emphasis can be inferred from the titles of papers we cite (such as 'Early developmental prevention of juvenile delinquency' by David Farrington) and regards as “a striking omission” our failure to cite historical texts on crime and crime control that are critical of developmental research. A large number of other documents informed our discussions in other sections of the report, but these were not included in Appendix 2. Therefore, little can be inferred from the nature of the papers abstracted in Appendix 2 of the report, except that they pretty much reflect what is in the literature we were required to review in Section 3.

Sociological reflection and community action
Richard’s critique seems to imply that the real problem is not crime “as such” (to think that way is to pathologise the already disadvantaged) but, rather, the
way crime is socially constructed and the way “criminals” – or potential criminals – are controlled. Indeed, Richard castigates us for being preoccupied with a “technical, problem-fixing agenda”, when we should have been concerned with how categories like “crime”, “crime prevention”, “development” and “early intervention” are constituted in the first place.

This is certainly a position that is commonly adopted in some areas of sociological criminology, although I would judge that it was rather more popular in the 1960s and 1970s when labelling theory and critical criminology were more in vogue than they are today. Reasons for the decline in popularity of these schools of thought, and for the corresponding rise of left realist and other theories that take seriously the harm caused by crime, include the romantic nature of the former’s assumptions and the singular lack of empirical evidence to underpin them. The fact is that crime, and the risk factors that Richard dismisses with such contempt as lacking in “phenomenological sense”, are very much an unpleasant, daily reality for a significant portion of the population. In the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, including some Aboriginal communities, the problems are shattering in their intensity. According to the recent report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence (ATSIWTFV), the levels of family and other violence are so high that many people simply find it difficult to comprehend:

Indigenous people generally have been profoundly affected by the erosion of their culture and spiritual identity and the disintegration of family and Community that has sustained relationships and obligations and maintained social order and control. While some Indigenous peoples were able to escape the past, whole families and Communities are now fighting the consequences. Appalling acts of physical brutality and sexual violence are being perpetrated within some families and across Communities to degrees previously unknown in Indigenous life. Sadly, many of the victims are women and children, young and older people now living in a constant state of desperation and despair (ATSIWTFV 1999, p.xii).

Now it is certainly true that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. As the Task Force authors social problems should be addressed. Moreover, an analysis of the situation of Indigenous communities leads swiftly to an analysis of policing practices and the organisation of crime control. Again in the words of the Task Force, “the injustices of the justice system were unequivocally stated to be causing Indigenous peoples most grief” (ATSIWTFV 1999, p.xvi). Nevertheless, the bottom line for the Task Force is the need for immediate action: “there may not be another chance” (ATSIWTFV 1999, p.xi).

We share the belief of the Task Force members that a developmental prevention approach of the kind we propose in our report can make a significant contribution to the reduction of even the most serious kinds of crime and violence. Their report emphasises that the family is the nucleus of Indigenous existence and self-image, and that “there must be unequivocal support and immediate action from all stakeholders ... to pursue initiatives immediately to retain and strengthen family units and promote harmony in Communities” (ATSIWTFV 1999, p.214). Of course, as the Pathways report emphasises, in addition to programs designed to strengthen families and communities through developmental interventions, there are many other kinds of programs that are essential in multiply disadvantaged communities, and they all must be implemented within a framework that genuinely empowers people for personal and community change.

I fail to understand how a solidly researched set of interventions with empowerment as a goal, designed in collaboration with local communities and controlled by those communities, can be dismissed as a “technical, problem-fixing agenda ...”. What is wrong with using the best research available in an attempt to alleviate the suffering of individuals, families and whole communities? What, in fact, is wrong with fixing problems if it is within one’s power so to do? (Who would not fix a leaky tap if they could,

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or a call in a plumber – the technical expert – if they had to?) How could one defend, on scientific or moral grounds, not embarking on this agenda if specific developmental problems are amenable to systemic solutions, as the literature suggests they are? And surely it would be scientifically and morally irresponsible not to attempt to evaluate as rigorously as possible the impact of such initiatives. It is certainly possible to make things worse, or at least to have no positive effects, with well-intentioned programs, but without measurement one will never know.

**Intervention**

Much of Richard’s critical note is concerned with the assumed problems of targeting and prediction that he sees as inherent in early intervention programs. He asserts that “the rationale of a ‘pathways’ project is that causative signposts can and should be identifiable in any given case” (Hil 1999, p.50). He correctly observes that despite the range of risk and protective factors that can be measured, it is not possible to predict with any certainty which individuals at a young age will engage in crime or acts of violence as adolescents. He also asserts that “a blanket approach to intervention, implicit in much of the report, would mean no intervention in relation to all those deemed ‘at risk’, irrespective of whether or not they are likely to offend!” (Hil 1999, p.50).

Space does not permit a detailed response to these issues. However, we devote 99 pages (excluding references) in the second section of the report (DCPC 1999a, pp.18-116) to the development of a policy framework within which developmental interventions can be planned, implemented and evaluated. Many of the points raised by Richard are addressed in this section and in other parts of the report. Nevertheless, a brief comment is clearly required here.

A preliminary point should be made about the issue of identification and stigmatisation of children “at risk”. As Tremblay (1999) observes in a discussion of aggression and violence in children, young boys who fail to learn alternatives to physical aggression are at very high risk of many other problems (including hyperactivity and disruptive behaviours). Consequently, they are swiftly taken out of their “natural” peer group and placed in special classes and other situations that, ironically, often reinforce marginal behaviour. The general point is that children who exhibit aggressive, disruptive or other kinds of “problem” behaviours are routinely identified by teachers, parents and other authority figures and are “dealt with” in a variety of ways that are not always constructive for the child or for others. Pre-existing labelling or stigmatisation of “children with problems” or, worse, “problem children”, is a widespread phenomenon that any early intervention program must be designed to deal with and not exacerbate.

Three forms of intervention are generally recognised in the literature: clinical (or indicated or tertiary), targeted (or secondary) and universal (or primary). In clinical programs, the family with a child who is perceived to have a disorder seeks help. In targeted approaches, certain children are selected not necessarily because they have a disorder but because they are deemed at risk of developing one. Universal approaches involve all children in an area or setting (such as a school). The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are well summarised by Offord and his colleagues (Offord et al. 1999). Not surprisingly, the list of disadvantages that attaches to targeted interventions is by far the longest and (in my view) contains the most serious problems. These include the problems of stigmatisation and prediction already mentioned, as well as the general failure of targeted programs to focus on the social context. Universal programs have the interesting advantage of being more likely to involve the middle class, which increases the chances that they will be well run. As a result, however, those who least need the input may benefit the most. All three approaches have their place, but determining the optimum mix is a complex problem. Offord et al. offer some useful guidelines, but the bottom line is “do no harm”.

**Conclusion**

This brief attempt to address Richard’s major criticisms, and to restate the essence of our understanding of developmental prevention has been a useful exercise since it has forced me to think again about our assumptions and also to explore some of the small mountain of books and articles published in the field since our report was completed. We have a much richer body of literature to draw on than was the case only two years ago. This literature is increasingly interdisciplinary and is beginning to make strong connections between biological and psychosocial processes on the one hand, and sociological and economic structures on the other.

It has always been my view that interdisciplinary is the key to progress in the field. That belief was my motivation when I took the initiative to form the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium. I fear, however, that some of my fellow academics in other disciplines such as sociology are not enamoured of an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates psychology and biology. If I am correct, we can ignore each other; we can keep arguing, perhaps much of the time at cross-purposes; or we can attempt a constructive dialogue. My preference is for dialogue outside of the disciplinary barricades.

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