

Measuring What Matters

Submission by TaskForce Community Agency

About Taskforce Community Agency

TaskForce Community Agency is a registered not-for-profit that has existed for more than 50 years, serving communities in Melbourne's south, south-east and more recently in Shepparton.

TaskForce helps individuals and families who face challenges with alcohol and other drugs or with family violence. TaskForce also empowers and enables people through education, training, development and employment.

TaskForce aims to help people realise their potential through the provision of life-changing services (including wraparound support), pathways, achieving outcomes and working towards healthier lives, relationships, and communities.

What to measure when measuring what matters

TaskForce Community Agency agrees that "measuring what matters" is crucial in giving government the information it needs to help citizens live more fulfilled, productive and creative lives, leading to better economic and social outcomes for all Australians.

While governments, government agencies, universities and other organisations are adept at macro measurements, what happens at the support-delivery coalface is too often ignored, even when there is impeccable evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of preventative social programs that make a real difference in peoples' lives.

Measuring what happens in the lives of Australia's most marginalised will provide governments and other agencies with the tools to ensure that not just the comparatively well off, those from stable homes and the fortunate get to live fulfilled, productive lives.



Prevention: cleaning up the mess costs far too much

Australia's social support systems all too often emphasis responding to crises rather than putting preventative measures in place.

In 2020/21, Australia spent \$1.1 billion on youth justice, 65% of this (\$724 million) was accounted for in detention-based services (in Victoria, the 2021/22 budget allocated \$200 million on youth detention yet only one tenth of that figure was directed to youth crime prevention initiatives).

The benefit of investing in mitigation and prevention far outweighs the cost of recovery, a concept already recognised by the Albanese Government in disaster recovery efforts.

What is needed are interventions that identify and assist young people before they get to the point where they are engaged with the justice system. Such initiatives include broadly accessible prevention programs and early intervention programs positioned outside of the justice system.

Many academic studies have already identified the indicators and risk factors for young people. They have also identified how to help individuals, families and communities build the protective factors to help young people thrive. (Source: [Youth justice: criminal trajectories | Australian Institute of Criminology \(aic.gov.au\)](#))

The prevention programs not only divert young people from the justice system, the approach also reduces harms associated with poor mental health, with drug and alcohol harms, with family violence, child and family welfare and reduces intergenerational issues. (Source: [Preventing the onset of youth offending: The impact of the Pathways to Prevention Project on child behaviour and wellbeing | Australian Institute of Criminology \(aic.gov.au\)](#))

In other words, prevention is enormously cost-effective for government and communities.

Justice reinvestment initiatives have demonstrated enormous success and cost-benefit however are predominately seen in Aboriginal communities. These principles can be applied across Australia. A cost benefit analysis has been done in Queensland for youth crime. (Link: [Microsoft Word - Bratanova, Robinson Cost effectiveness analysis of a justice reinvestment Discussion paper March 2015.docx \(uq.edu.au\)](#) .

Prevention provides significant savings to government in terms of incarceration and other justice-system costs, and direct benefits to the community by helping young people become stable, functioning, engaged, tax-paying members of society who do not turn to crime.

There are also major savings to be achieved in health.

A report for Prevention 1st – a campaign by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), Alzheimer's Australia, and the Consumers Health Forum of Australia – found that Australia spends just \$89 per person on prevention.

This is 1.34 per cent of all health spending, which is considerably less than countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. (Source: https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Preventive-health-How-much-does-Australia-spend-and-is-it-enough_FINAL.pdf)

Fractured systems

Australia's fractured support systems need a holistic approach to cut costs for governments and society and to maximise opportunities for individuals.

For example, almost every individual who needs support will have multiple issues – such as some combination of drugs, alcohol, mental health and unemployment.

Far too often individuals are forced to find help from separate providers working out of separate sites because the system is so siloed.

This is analogous to having to go to one service centre to get your car's brakes fixed, another one to change the oil filter, another to check the tyre pressure and so on. No one would design a system that way for a vehicle, so why do we do it for people who need help?

There is a lot of evidence around the multiple and complex needs people present with to services. If only one issue can be addressed, that is recognized as not as impactful as when multiple issues can be addressed simultaneously, where much more sustainable and successful outcomes are achieved.

Funding streams are often very targeted and lack a holistic capacity.

The wraparound model would ensure that far fewer people would be frustrated by fragmented systems when seeking the help they need.

The wraparound model proportionally helps far more people to achieve positive outcomes, bringing benefits to the individual, and savings for the government and the community. (Source: [Intensive community treatment and support "Youth Wraparound" service in Western Australia: A case and feasibility study - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#))

The wraparound model works

As an example, TaskForce delivers the Living Free program to girls and young women with, or at risk of, contact with the justice system across Melbourne's southeast.

In Victoria, 43.6% of prisoners released during 2018–19 returned to prison within two years (to 2020–21). This rate is slightly lower than the Australian rate of 45.2%. (Source: [Sentencing Advisory Council](#))

Not one of the **343 girls and young women** who have engaged with the Living Free Program since its inauguration in 2018 have been sentenced to return to prison. That is a **100 per cent success rate** at the five-year mark in the program's existence.



What to measure

TaskForce Community Agency is calling for the Federal Government to measure the effectiveness of social programs, to help guide the sector towards the creation of a true holistic approach for individuals with multiple issues and invest long-term in prevention and early intervention programs.

As the system stands, people with the most complex needs are those who would most benefit from holistic services but miss out living fulfilled lives because our single-issue system approach fails them.

To ensure people get the help they need and for all Australians to live fulfilled lives, governments need to be open to a new approach to “measuring what matters”. That means:

Measure the experiences of those who have fallen through the gaps

- Those with complex social and health needs often fail to be captured in surveys and evaluations because they fall through the gaps – policy and decision making is guided by data that is not a true representation because those who cost the most in relation to health, community and justice are not participating e.g. they don't do the census or participate in community consultations or even lived experience opportunities (unless supported by professionals).

Measure for the long-term

- Long-term intergenerational change takes time to measure – if millions is invested in employment programs yet the services and funding in health/ community services don't exist to assist people to address barriers to meaningful engagement, the outcome for the economy would not be positive. However, if there is capacity for more people to have meaningful connection with services and supports to address barriers such as alcohol and drug use then they will be more capable of engaging in the next step of training/education/employment.

Measure connection to community

- We need to measure meaningful connection to community as connection is often the first step in recovery for a myriad of barriers to economic participation. This includes connection with education, family, friends, volunteering etc.

Measure education outcomes – use modern methodologies

- Education system measurements are archaic and can be manipulated. Breaking the cycle of entrenched disadvantaged begins with education. We need new measures of school participation that are not based on academic performance. Schools need to be funded to fully engage students and families – particularly in the most disadvantaged areas.



Measure outcomes not outputs, invest for the long-term

- Government funded programs are measured on outputs. There is an appetite to move to outcome-focused measures but funding models are short-term. Services need longer-term funding with less prescriptive models of care. Supporting individuals with complexity requires longer-term intervention and this will allow for more sustainable outcomes to be achieved, which lead to an increased capacity for consumers to be supported into meaningful economic participation.

Measuring the success of prevention and investing appropriately

- Measure and invest in prevention and early intervention programs and compare the results with current attempts to manage the mess after it has been made. Then invest in long-term prevention programs across all sectors.

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