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JUVENILE CRIME

Parents must 'face the music'

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As a society we have long held to the theory of retributive justice which holds that punishment, if proportionate, is the best response to crime.

Certainly the issue of making the punishment fit the crime has been a hot topic in recent debate.

I support the Government's efforts in trying to ensure that this happens.

I do wonder, sometimes, whether we are actually bringing all the right people to account.

In the case of many juvenile crimes we have a right to ask whether the parents ought to "face the music" a bit more often. There seem to be few mechanisms to effect this.

Some parents simply do not deserve to have charge of their children and it is time to ask ourselves whether, in fact, they should.

They neither care about their kids nor give them the required guidance.

In many instances the parents are incapable or unwilling to provide even the basic necessities of life, yet it takes a long time for us to intervene in an effective way.

Children without basic parental nurturing are hardly likely to be concerned about the consequences of their crimes.

For many young offenders being caught and punished comes at the end of enduring a lifetime of much worse things.

Take, for example, the case of three young children (aged eight, 10 and 11) who allegedly committed an aggravated robbery on a 14-year-old girl in a Cannington park last week. The robbery was committed at 2.30pm when the children should have been at school.

Who was aware they were not? The 11-year-old has already been cautioned twice and arrested once.

The house where he lives is



Time for action: Karl O'Callaghan stands in a park where a 14-year-old girl was attacked. Picture: Megan Powell

frequented by crime and drug offenders and in January, drugs, weapons and stolen property were seized from the house by police.

The only "responsible" adult who could be found to look after him after he was arrested had 181 criminal convictions. The 10-year-old has already been cautioned three times and his mother has 81 criminal convictions including drug-related offences and going armed in public.

A recent visitor to the boy's house was being monitored by police as a registered sex offender who has amassed 350 criminal convictions, predominantly sex-related offences.

The eight-year-old is believed to be one of 10 children in a family. His father has 137 criminal convictions and is a repeat domestic violence offender. His mother has drug-related convictions.

The parents of this child could not be found when he was apprehended by police.

Only the 11 and 10-year-olds are at the age of criminal responsibility

and though it is clear they must be brought to justice, any sanction is likely to pale into insignificance compared with what they have already endured.

Detention is more meaningful to us in having them removed from public nuisance than it is to them and, in fact, many of these kids expect it as inevitable.

After all, that is exactly what happens to their parents and older siblings.

Just to make the point that the case alluded to above is not an extreme example, we only need to look at the running sheets for the South East Metropolitan District from last weekend.

On Friday at 11.30pm, a three-year-old nappy-clad toddler with a black eye walked into a bottle shop and had to be taken into protective custody by the police when his parents could not be found.

He was later handed over to Crisis Care.

Last Saturday, police attended an address after concerns were raised about assaults on chil-

dren. The mother is a drug user. Police reported that there was no food in the house.

Later that evening, police apprehended two eight-year-olds and one 12-year-old for breaking into a primary school in Victoria Park. On Sunday, a nine-year-old, 11-year-old and a 13-year-old were apprehended for breaking into a primary school in Southern River.

Police cannot hope to sort this mess out without radical change to the way we operate.

This is what is being trialled in the South East Metropolitan District as police, with other Government agencies, are forced to turn their minds to addressing the social drivers of crime.

It means that teams of police, working with others, will have to be involved in dealing with the complex situations in which these children find themselves.

But there is a limit to how much we can do in these circumstances and there may be need for more radical intervention.

Many of these children are

little more than an unintended consequence of someone's lifestyle.

It would be fair to ask why these children are allowed to remain in the custody of their parents whose track records indicates they are simply not capable of looking after their children, nor are ever likely to be.

This is not about stealing a generation but saving an existing one. Every chance we give these parents is one less chance we give the child. Every child we leave in this chaos is closer to inflicting chaos on all of us.

I understand that the ideal situation is for parents to look after their children and to be supported, if necessary, by government and non-government agencies.

I also know that there are simply not enough places for these children to go if they are removed.

A major reason why children are left in these circumstances is that there are limited alternatives and insufficient foster carers out there.

We should be able to do more as a community and get more involved in helping out. Not everyone has the means to do so but it would make a big difference to these children and believe me, there are plenty of them.

More of us may have to consider "stepping up to the plate" to accept greater involvement in making our community a better place to live if we want things to change.

Maybe what I am advocating will be seen by some as heresy but I cannot help thinking that if our only response to children committing crimes is to put them into the justice system we are unlikely to have much impact on the spiralling (very) young offender crime rate.

I would go as far as to say that the children referred to have absolutely no chance of living a normal existence if we leave them where they are.