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Tackling the volatile fire before it flares again

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Activists and authorities alike lament a failure to stop reoffending by many Aboriginal youths. DOUGLAS SMITH finds out what has gone wrong

Aboriginal leader Tauto Sansbury knows better than most the difficulties faced when it comes to stopping indigenous youths from committing crime.

He was instrumental in preparing a report for the State Government 10 years ago to tackle the so-called Gang of 49.

A decade later, and with indigenous youths still being arrested for a string of car thefts and high-speed police chases across Adelaide, he sadly admits that little has changed.

Mr Sansbury is a chairman of the SA Aboriginal Justice Advocacy. A tireless campaigner for Aboriginal rights, he worked with Monsignor David Cappo on the To Break The Cycle report, commissioned by the State Government as Adelaide reeled from a crime spree by 49 Aboriginal offenders identified by a police taskforce, Operation Mandrake.

To Break The Cycle contained 46 recommendations on overhauling the juvenile justice system, with a special focus on reducing offending by indigenous youths.

Mr Sansbury said very few of the recommendations were implemented and the system had in fact deteriorated.

"I've always said that there is no rehabilitative program that's working effectively at the moment in South Australia that looks out for young (Aboriginal) people," he said.

"In 2007 the Mandrake team was established to look at the alleged Gang of 49 and we're 10 years down the track and nothing has changed, nothing has improved - it's actually gotten worse.

"I think they should've implemented a number of recommendations from the (To Break The Cycle) report, but too many reports have been written and too many reports have gathered dust." Indigenous youths in Australia are 28 times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-indigenous peers, and the numbers don't look to be lowering anytime soon.

At the height of the so-called Gang of 49's crime spree, the State Government was

pressured to deal with the issue quickly - which resulted in Operation Mandrake being established in an effort to stop and lock up the hardened and core offenders.

However, once an indigenous youth has offended, been detained, processed through the juvenile justice system, incarcerated and re-released into society, they have a 53 per cent chance of reoffending.

The data shows that on many occasions, the juvenile justice system becomes a revolving door.

As we see in the Youth Court, some indigenous youth offenders have been out of detention for a matter of weeks before allegedly reoffending.

Chief Justice Chris Kourakis said recidivism rates would only be reduced once the health, educational, economic and sociocultural capital of indigenous people, individually and collectively, was restored.

"The main causes of unacceptably high indigenous incarceration rates have been known for decades - and they are entrenched socioeconomic disadvantage, poor health, low educational standards, family and cultural breakdowns and very limited employment opportunities," he said.

"In the administration of criminal justice, that requires linking community corrections orders to useful educational and vocational training centres, objectively evaluated drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs and real employment opportunities." Corrections Minister Peter Malinauskas conceded the State Government needed to do better at providing rehabilitative programs on the outside.

"Better rehabilitation is the key to reducing reoffending rates," he said. "Around a quarter of those within SA prisons are of Aboriginal background ... Through better rehabilitation we can reduce the number of repeat offenders, and therefore reduce Aboriginal incarceration rates." Mr Malinauskas last year announced a target to cut reoffending in SA by 10 per cent and appointed a panel to put recommendations forward to the Government. "Seven recommendations have been developed specifically to address Aboriginal reoffending," he said.

Lowering recidivism rates among indigenous youth has been achieved in other countries through restorative justice programs.

New Zealand spearheaded the Family Group Conference, which allows a Maori community to decide the punishment and rehabilitation path for an offending youth. Court sessions are held in traditional maraes (meeting grounds).

This type of restorative justice gives the youth the opportunity to own up to their wrongdoing and admit the harm they've caused. The victims can also be involved in rehabilitation of young offenders.

SA has a family conference system, which Mr Sansbury said wasn't being used to its full potential. Recent numbers show a decrease in participants of the family conference. Mr Sansbury said he and his organisation were currently developing a more effective restorative justice program for indigenous youth.

