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Pick up pieces in our jails

Fr Joe Caddy

April 29, 2008

A TRENDY looking group of 20-somethings gathers on a street in Carlton during a night out.

A young man in the group points towards a nearby restaurant, describing in detail the shooting that took place there during Melbourne's recent gangland wars.

He had just got hold of a bootleg copy of the outlawed, "outlaw" series, Underbelly and is sharing the gruesome details with his mates.

As a Catholic chaplain in Melbourne's maximum-security prisons, I am often asked about the true characters of Melbourne's "celebrity gangsters".

Perhaps our society's long fascination with Ned Kelly and the more contemporary dark world of organised crime betrays the convict origins of our colony, or perhaps there is simply a human tendency to flirt with a life of perceived excitement, risk and freedom from the law and conventions that bring order and civilisation to our world.

Whatever our fascination with the characters and drama of Melbourne's infamous gangland crime scene, they bear little resemblance to the majority of people who wind up in our prison system.

Our jails look more like society's bottom drawer than a casting call for the television show Prison Break.

And like the bottom drawer, jails end up full of all of those who just don't

fit anywhere else - out of sight and out of mind.

Most have never driven a luxury car, or eaten in a fancy restaurant.

They are not criminal masterminds trying to stash fortunes in offshore accounts.

They cannot afford high-priced legal counsel, instead relying on the stretched resources of legal aid.

Most prisons are filled with young men who did not intentionally go out to commit crimes.

They probably never thought about the consequences of their actions and the impact on others, themselves and their families.

Australian Institute of Criminology data shows 15-19 year olds are the most likely group to be brought before the courts with the majority being young men.

The Victorian Department of Justice statistics show there were 4183 prisoners in the Victorian prison system on 30 June 2007, representing an increase of 58 per cent on the 30 June 1997 figure of 2643.

This means more and more young men are finding themselves behind bars.

Between 60 and 80 per cent of all detainees arrested test positive to a variety of drugs.

Many were caught stealing goods they then sell in order to support their habit.

These detainees are more likely to receive a custodial sentence than a community service.

The prison population is over-represented by people with a mental illness or disability and many were homeless and disconnected from their family before incarceration.

The real underbelly of our society is far from glamorous.

Those who wind up in jail have dropped off the edges of our communities into that bottom drawer, which is our prison system.

It's been suggested that lenient penalties lead to recidivism among young Victorian offenders.

But a heavy hand is not an answer.

Tougher penalties risk hardening young offenders who are forced to survive a system that does not address the reasons so many young people wind up in our jails.

If we want to prevent the revolving door for young people coming out of prison, we need to devise greater options for sentencing and treatment to deal with the underlying causes.

More should be done to divert those people who need help away from jail, leaving the prisons for crimes that fit the punishment, like those perpetrated by real "gangsters" who represent only a small proportion of the prison population.

For the rest: offenders who are sick should be treated; those with disabilities should be cared for; those who are poor should be afforded opportunity and those who are addicted should be directed towards rehabilitation.

A recent Council of Australian Governments report says it costs \$212.50 a day to keep someone in prison, but only \$16.50 to supervise a person on a community correction order.

It would be better economic policy, and more importantly, better social policy to treat offenders in the community and to use the savings to contribute to further efforts to integrate them back into society.

By contrast a hefty bill for Her Majesty's hotel will only render most young offenders less socially able and more criminally capable on their release, a poor outcome for them and for the broader community.

Fr Joe Caddy is chaplain at Melbourne's maximum security men's jails