

# Loss of blue-collar jobs fuel to offending, says criminologist Young men key to surge

NICHOLAS PAYNE

TEENS and young men are the main drivers of a surge in offending in Geelong that has doubled our crime rate in less than a decade.

Police statistics on age and sex of offenders obtained by the *Geelong Advertiser* reveal teenage boys aged 15 to 19 were the worst offenders, suspected of at least 1000 crimes last year.

On a pure gender breakdown, women are responsible

for about 20 per cent of crimes — and men 80 per cent — across the Greater Geelong, Queenscliff, Surf Coast and Golden Plains shires.

Deakin University criminologist Richard Evans said crime was overwhelmingly a young man's game.

"The criminal justice system mostly revolves around processing young, stupid men," he said.

Dr Evans said there was a saying in criminology circles that "the best crime prevention

measure is a young man's 30th birthday".

Of the almost 7000 recorded incidents last year, 40 per cent were committed by males aged 15 to 29. The older end of that group, 25 to 29-year-olds, more than doubled its offending in the nine years between 2007 and 2016 — a rise of 329 to 845 offences.

The crunch of our local crime statistics shows offences recorded by police in Greater Geelong rose from 3540 in 2007 to 6945 last year.

The real crime rate is considerably higher because the data records as 'single offending incidents' situations where an offender may have committed multiple offences in one spree.

Over the same nine years, Surf Coast offences rose by almost a third, Golden Plains offences more than doubled but in Queenscliff they halved.

Dr Evans said Geelong's youth offending rates could be partly attributed to the loss of manufacturing work with

the closure of Alcoa and Ford. He said Geelong was not crime-ridden overall but fewer jobs for less-educated young men was helping fuel the surge in youth offending.

"Traditional blue-collar jobs, they just don't exist now," he said.

"We are an area that's in transition and whenever there's a big economic shift you will get an increase in youth crime."

Dr Evans said education was the best way of preventing youth crime, as well as working

on ways to give disenfranchised youths "a socially useful role".

Unlike the disconnected suburbs of a major city, Dr Evans believes Geelong's smaller, "stronger" community means we are better placed to deal with the issue.

"Community grassroots sports have a very valuable role in this sort of thing," Dr Evans said.

"You never get rid of crime ... you reduce crime and make for a stronger community."

## Daniel the one that got away

NICHOLAS PAYNE

**A FORMER teen gang member has told how he escaped a life of youth crime before it was too late.**

As the state reels from a youth crime epidemic, northern suburbs man Daniel, 23, said he knows from experience what young men can be capable of.

"I joined gangs when I was 13. The first time I got arrested was when I was 14," Daniel said. "I was on drugs, and I used to be a real heavy drinker at a young age."

He said a 'boys will be boys' approach to youth crime was part of the problem.

"It's just an excuse," he said.

Daniel said the way boys were brought up was key to preventing them from turning to crime.

"Most young people do what they do because of neglect," he said. "It all just starts from their parents — if they're not raised right, then obviously they're not going to be right."

The Norlane man now has children of his own, something that grounded him and focused his resolve to change for the better.

"I thought I'd go off and be my own man and make my own life," he said.

"I learned from it and now I've got three kids and I'm out of all that gang life and fighting and everything now."

But he said "it's not easy" to turn away from that life and the people you once knew, and that he could still fall into trouble. "I had to get beaten up to leave," he said.

Daniel has two young sons and said he didn't want them to make the same mistakes he did. "They'll see my backhand before they see a gang," he said.



**VOICE OF EXPERIENCE:** Daniel, 23 of Norlane. He joined a gang in his early teens and has warned young people to stay away from them.

Picture: PETER RISTEVSKI

## CALLS TO SACK CHIEF

ALEX SINNOTT

CHIEF Commissioner Graham Ashton is under mounting pressure from a chorus of police figures over top brass's handling of the Bourke St killings and Victoria's youth crime epidemic.

The latest blows for Mr Ashton came last night when State Opposition Leader Matthew Guy refused to publicly back the top cop, and more respected policing figures expressed their dismay with the incumbent chief.

When asked if a state Coalition Government would retain Mr Ashton as chief commissioner, Mr Guy yesterday would only say Premier Daniel Andrews was "not ensuring that our police are strong and responsive and not simply a passive spectator".

Former Police Association president Phil Edge was critical of a "softly-softly" attitude among top brass and the courts.

Mr Edge, a Colac resident who lives in the same part of town where two Malmesbury escapees were caught last week, said residents were frustrated by a lack of leadership on law and order.

"We're seeing the consequences of the softly-softly approach from the judiciary and those at the top of law enforcement," he told the *Geelong Advertiser*. "You can add all the extra officers you like to the force but you need the judiciary to back them up. This clearly isn't happening, as the sad events of the past few months have shown."

His comments came after ex-veteran homicide detective Charlie Bezzina went public on the weekend stating Mr Ashton, appointed by Premier Daniel Andrews in 2015, should be dumped along with senior members of police command.

Increased crime rates have also led former chief commissioner Kel Glare to push for sweeping changes to Victoria Police's "risk-averse" philosophy.

Mr Glare unveiled a 70-point plan to roll back increased crime which included police cars beefed up with nudge bars and a re-evaluation of juvenile offenders.

Mr Ashton was forced to defend his position during a press conference in Melbourne yesterday. "There's a bit of a myth around that the fact that we're somehow soft on crime. Nothing could be further from the truth," Mr Ashton said. "People can talk about being hard, people like to think they're hard and tough, the fact is we have been hard, we have been tough and we've been consistently like that since I've been in this role."