

QUEENSLAND TREASURY

Crime Research Agenda 2021

Queensland Government Statistician's Office

Queensland Treasury

www.qgso.qld.gov.au

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1.0 Introduction

The purpose of the Crime Research Agenda (the Agenda) is to provide information on the crime research priority areas of the Queensland Government Statistician's Office (QGSO). The priority areas are:

- impact of COVID-19 on the criminal justice system
- system demand and effectiveness
- system pathways
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation.¹

The Agenda serves to guide the development of QGSO's crime research work program and communicate the direction of crime research to external stakeholders. It is also anticipated that the Agenda will assist in the identification of potential research partnerships and collaborations.

This document provides background information on QGSO and its crime statistics and research function, describes the role of the Crime Research Reference Committee (CRRRC) in supporting this function, and outlines the criteria that are used by QGSO and the CRRRC to frame decisions regarding the types of crime research projects undertaken by QGSO. Information on how the Agenda was developed and its implementation is also provided.

2.0 Background

2.1. Queensland Government Statistician's Office

QGSO is responsible for producing a range of information products and services to support government, business and the public. Key areas of work include:

- providing statistical services and data management (including data linkage)
- conducting surveys on behalf of Queensland Government agencies
- providing advice on data collection, research and evaluation
- monitoring and conducting evaluations of Queensland Government policies and programs
- developing information for population dynamics analysis and forecasting (including population, land supply, households and dwellings, and school enrolments)
- coordinating the activities of statistics providers to maintain an integrated statistical service across government.

The work of QGSO is facilitated by the *Statistical Returns Act 1896* (Qld) (the Act), which provides for the collection of official statistics by the Queensland Government Statistician, a statutory role appointed by the Governor in Council.

All information collected by QGSO is bound by the secrecy provisions of the Act. The Act precludes any person divulging or communicating any information obtained under the Act unless authorised by the Queensland Government Statistician.

2.2. Crime statistics and research

The crime statistics and research function of QGSO has two primary objectives. These are:

- publish criminal justice statistics
- undertake research into criminal justice issues.

The crime statistics and research function is supported by a multi-disciplinary team of people with expertise in quantitative and qualitative research strategies. The crime statistics and research work of QGSO adds value to Queensland by taking a whole-of-criminal justice system approach to its work and contributing to the evidence base used to develop and implement criminal justice responses by Queensland Government.

¹ The use of the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in this report refers to persons who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both, and is not intended to diminish or deny the diversity of cultures, traditional practices and differences across the different clans and communities located across Australia and the Torres Strait.

2.3. Crime Research Reference Committee

The CRRC supports QGSO's crime research by providing advice on the Agenda and crime research projects. It is comprised of criminal justice and research experts with an understanding of Queensland's current criminal justice issues and an interest in criminal justice research.

The CRRC includes representation from the following organisations:

- Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships
- Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (Youth Justice)
- Department of Justice and Attorney-General
- Department of the Premier and Cabinet
- Griffith University
- James Cook University
- Queensland Corrective Services
- Queensland Police Service
- Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council
- University of Queensland
- Victim Assist Queensland.

2.4. Developing the Agenda

Several processes were used to identify the research priority areas identified in the Agenda. These include consultation with key criminal justice stakeholders, consideration of emerging research findings and the incorporation of CRRC advice. These processes are described in more detail below.

2.4.1. Consultation

QGSO consulted informally with key criminal justice stakeholders to develop its understanding of contemporary criminal justice issues, gather ideas on crime research projects considered to be of value to the criminal justice sector, collect information on the types of crime research projects already in progress, and identify potential research partnership opportunities.

There was consistency in the key messages heard during consultation and project ideas were raised in relation to common issues.

2.4.2. Prior research

QGSO has undertaken a range of research projects that have investigated criminal justice issues relevant to Queensland. The results of these projects and those emerging from other studies were considered in the development of the Agenda. Prior research will also be used to inform the development future crime research projects to progressed by QGSO.

2.4.3. CRRC review

A draft version of the Agenda was reviewed by members of the CRRC. Feedback was incorporated into the final version of the Agenda in a way that supported a balanced reflection of their advice.

3.0 Priority crime research areas

The priority crime research areas of QGSO are: impact of COVID-19 on the criminal justice system; system demand and effectiveness; system pathways and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation. Further information on each of these priority areas is provided below.^{2,3}

QGSO priority crime research areas



Impact of COVID-19
on the criminal
justice system



System demand
and effectiveness



Overrepresentation of
Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander peoples



System pathways

3.1. Impact of COVID-19 on the criminal justice system

The implementation of social containment measures aimed at minimising the transmission of COVID-19 has been associated with changes in the number of offences reported to, and detected by, the police.⁴ For example, QGSO found that Queensland's monthly property offence rate was significantly lower than expected following the introduction of containment measures in March 2020, while the monthly illicit drug offence rate was significantly higher than expected in April, May and June 2020. Concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on DFV have also been raised (Carrington et al. 2020).

Differences in crime trends observed during the pandemic have largely been explained by changes in the opportunity to commit crime (Hodgkinson and Andresen 2020), reduced ability for some victims to report crime (Boxall, Morgan and Brown 2020) or varying visibility of offenders during certain lockdown periods (Dietze and Peacock 2020). The pandemic also affected the operation of Queensland's police, court and correctional systems (Productivity Commission 2021; Queensland Corrective Services 2020; Queensland Courts 2020).

Ongoing monitoring of the impact of COVID-19 on Queensland's crime trends will support the criminal justice system's ongoing ability to implement agile and effective responses to any changing crime trends associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes understanding the interplay between crime trends and the pandemic's possible medium to long-term impact on the economy, mental health and illicit drug use.⁵

² The data described in this publication may vary from data published elsewhere by QGSO and others. Data variation can be due to differences in the dates data are extracted, counting rules or statistical standards applied. Readers are urged to exercise caution when making comparisons between publications.

³ Domestic and family violence (DFV) was identified as a key research priority in QGSO's previous Agenda. While addressing DFV remains a priority for government, consulted stakeholders indicated that undertaking DFV-focussed research in a context of system review activity may result in a duplication of research effort by other agencies. For example, in March 2021, the Queensland Government established the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce to examine coercive control, the need for a domestic violence offence and the experience of women across the criminal justice system, which is likely to result in a series of system reform recommendations. With the objective of the Crime Research Agenda being to complement research across government, DFV has been removed as a research priority in this Agenda. However, the relevance of DFV in the interpretation of research findings will remain a key feature of all crime research progressed by QGSO.

⁴ Changing crime trends have been observed both nationally and internationally. Social containment measures include broad-scale social-distancing measures, quarantining of high-risk individuals, border closures and the closure of certain businesses. In Queensland, the use of these measures was first introduced in March 2020.

⁵ Research has consistently shown a relatively high prevalence of unemployment, mental health issues and illicit drug use among offenders (AIHW 2019). It is therefore possible that changes in these factors may impact crime trends.

3.2. System demand and effectiveness

Before COVID-19, demand on Queensland's criminal justice system was characterised by growth in the number of people in contact with the system and increasing case complexity. For example, the number of adults held in custody and under community supervision increased by 24% and 34% respectively between 2014 and 2019 (QGSO 2020a) which is higher than Queensland's total population growth (about 8%) (QGSO 2020b).^{6,7} The total number of people proceeded against by police (QGSO 2020c) also increased during this period, while matters finalised in criminal courts have involved an increasing average number of charges per court appearance (QGSO 2020a).^{8,9}

The profile of people held in custody has also changed. For example, the number of unsentenced adults held in custody increased 62% between 2014 and 2019 which, in effect, changed the proportion of people on remand in relation to the total adult prisoner population (increasing from 24% in 2014 to 31% in 2019) (QGSO 2020a).

Other QGSO research has found a decline in offender rates among those aged under 30 years, while the offender rate increased for older age groups, particularly those aged in their 30s and 40s. Furthermore, people in contact with the criminal justice system tend to be committing more offences on average and are increasingly likely to be assessed as having complex issues related to their offending behaviour.

The changing profile of people in contact with Queensland's criminal justice system has important implications for the design and delivery of criminal justice interventions. Understanding the factors contributing to criminal justice system demand will therefore continue to be a priority research focus for QGSO.

3.3. System pathways

The idea of developing a better understanding of the ways in which people move through the criminal justice system and their contact with other human service agencies is influenced by research that shows that offenders tend to be characterised by a relatively high prevalence of certain factors (such as alcohol and illicit drug misuse, mental health issues, poor family/marital circumstances and low engagement with school/work) and that addressing these factors is more likely to reduce their likelihood of future offending than the imposition of harsher sentences (Andrews and Bonta 2010). Research has also shown that criminal careers can exhibit both constancy and change across the life course (Paternoster et. al 1997). Most offenders will have brief and intermittent engagement with criminal behaviour, with only a small proportion experiencing prolonged criminal careers.

The needs of offenders is apparent in the National Prisoner Health Data Collection (NPHDC) undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The most recent survey found that 62% of participants reported using illicit drugs during the 12 months before entering prison and 39% had been told that they had a mental health disorder at some stage in their life (AIHW 2019).¹⁰ Eleven per cent of participants had been in youth detention and 58% had been unemployed during the month prior to entering custody (AIHW 2019).

Improving our understanding of Queensland offender trajectories has broad-ranging implications for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy and programs. In particular, system pathways research has the potential to support the effective use of resources by identifying the intervention opportunities most likely to result in reduced offending. Understanding offender contact with human services agencies will provide insight into the types of interventions required.

3.4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal justice system continues despite efforts to address this issue. In Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent about 4% of the total Queensland adult population, but 33% of adults in custody in 2019 (QGSO 2020a). When accounting for age differences

⁶ Information on adults in prison counts all people (sentenced and unsentenced) in custody on 30 June of each year, while information on adults in community corrections counts all people serving community corrections orders at 1 June each year.

⁷ This population growth figure is based on total Queensland population estimates for 2014 and 2019.

⁸ The police proceed against a person when it is alleged that they are responsible for committing an offence and police action is taken against them. This includes police actions such as arrest, summons, notice to appear, warrant, caution, community conference or other form of resolution when an offender is known but there is a bar to prosecution or other official process.

⁹ A finalised appearance in a criminal court is an offence or collection of offences for a single defendant that are finalised on the same day, at the same court level and court location (for instance by a guilty finding and sentence, discharge, dismissal or withdrawal; but not by committal or transfer to another court).

¹⁰ The most recent NPHDC occurred in 2018 and gathered information from adults in prisons in all Australian jurisdictions (except New South Wales) using surveys collected over a two-week period. The results presented here relate to prisoners in Queensland.

in the population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults were 12 times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous adults (QGSO 2020d).

At June 2020, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Queensland aged 10 to 17 years were 26 times more likely to be held in detention than non-Indigenous children and young people and, on average, 70% of all children and young people in detention were identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW 2020).¹¹

Research progressed by QGSO has also shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are overrepresented as victims of personal crime, people involved in police calls for service regarding DFV, people named on domestic violence orders and people breaching domestic violence orders.

Working towards the reduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the law and justice system is a key priority for Queensland's criminal justice agencies. Developing a better understanding of the drivers of overrepresentation and ways to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people desist from offending will assist in the development of responses to this issue.

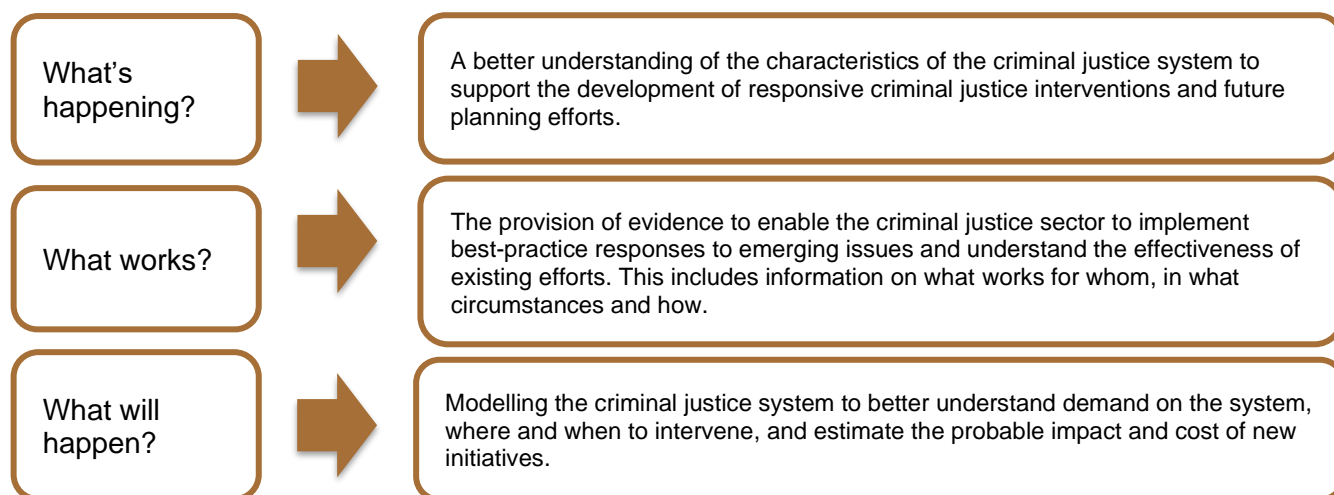
4.0 Implementation of the Agenda

This section provides information on how the Agenda will be implemented in practice.

4.1. Developing research projects

QGSO will use a collaborative approach to develop crime research projects in relation to the priority crime research areas identified in the Agenda. Projects will be framed by three high-level research questions that emerged during consultations with key stakeholders. These questions are outlined and described in more detail below.

High-level research questions



Stakeholders also identified the importance of understanding gendered differences, youth offending, domestic and family violence, the role of local contexts and the costs and benefits of criminal justice interventions when undertaking criminal justice research work. QGSO will therefore frame its crime research to reflect these issues where possible.

4.2. Assessing research projects

A set of criteria is used to frame decisions regarding the crime research projects undertaken by QGSO. These criteria support consideration of the strategic benefit, merit and implementation of projects and are set out in more detail below.

¹¹ Percentage change between time periods relating to youth justice information is highly sensitive given the relatively small number of people held in youth detention. For example, the average daily number of children and young people aged 10 to 17 years in youth detention in Queensland for the June quarter 2020 was 133.

4.2.1. Strategic benefit

- The research aligns with the Agenda.
- The research adds value to criminal justice agencies, other government and non-government agencies, and/or the broader community.
- The research takes a whole-of-system approach to understanding criminal justice issues.
- The research will build the evidence base required to develop criminal justice services and policy.
- The research improves public awareness of criminal justice issues.

4.2.2. Research merit

- The research is consistent with best practice research standards.
- The research methodology and timeframe is suitable.
- Similar research projects have been conducted previously.

4.2.3. Operational implications

- Research ethics have been considered.
- The research complies with privacy obligations and statutory provisions relating to the release of information.
- QGSO has the capability required to obtain and extract the required data/undertake the research.
- The research is cost-effective.
- There are partnership opportunities that can enhance the quality of research outputs.

4.3. Agenda review

The Agenda will be monitored by QGSO in relation to advice provided by the CRRC to ensure that it remains contemporary and relevant.

4.4. Research partnerships

QGSO recognises the value of establishing research partnerships in the implementation of its Crime Research Agenda.

Please contact QGSO by telephone on (07) 3035 6421 or via email to govstat@treasury.qld.gov.au for further information about the Agenda or to discuss research partnership opportunities consistent with the priority research areas identified in this document.

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