YOUTH-WORK researchers at RMIT University have warned adolescents' rights are at risk as policymakers embrace theories that adolescent brains are hard-wired for risk-taking and antisocial behaviour.

RMIT's Judith Bessant worries that such theories will reinforce negative stereotypes about young people and lead to policies that further marginalise them.

She fears they could also take the focus away from programs aimed at encouraging greater community participation and responsibility in young people.

The theories that concern her are based on evidence from advances in brain-scan technology that human brains do not fully develop until people reach their early 20s.

According to Professor Bessant, the logical policy conclusion of such theories would be to significantly raise the age at which people could drive, drink, have sex and vote.

Although no one was yet suggesting such policy shifts, Professor Bessant said the theory played on prejudices that see young people as difficult to handle. "It is in the atmosphere at the moment," she told the HES. "It is influencing the policy discourse."

The theory even had some pragmatic appeal to otherwise sceptical youth workers, as it could be used to encourage government spending on youth services.

Last year, in its Victorian government budget submission, the Youth Affairs Council appeared to acknowledge the theory, noting that "by investing in a co-ordinated youth service system for Victoria that addresses gaps in generalist youth support services, the Government can continue to foster the healthy brain development of young people".

RMIT youth-work lecturer Rys Farthing told the HES: "Some youth workers have suggested that it would be better to sit on our hands if it gets us better funding. But if we do that and accept this pragmatically, we have to take on the implications it has for young people's rights."

In Australia, psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg is a popular exponent of the adolescent brain theory. Commenting last year on an incident when seven teenage boys sexually assaulted a 17-year-old developmentally delayed woman, he suggested it was partly the result of their brain development.

The US Supreme Court relied on such scientific evidence in 2005 when it ruled that teenage murderers were less culpable for their actions and so should not be executed.

But while RMIT's Ms Farthing agreed that teenagers should be treated differently by the legal system, she told the HES that it shouldn't be because they were seen to be somehow mentally less culpable but because society took the view that their age made the prospect of rehabilitation likelier.
Professor Bessant said: "My concern is that promoting accounts that teenagers' brains make them do foolish things works against the promotion opportunities that young people can learn through, experience and thereby have the chance to develop in all the ways they can."

She said the theory was reminiscent of past discredited theories suggesting women and non-white racial groups had inferior brains.

"Some young people are sometimes at risk not because their brains are different but because they have not had the experience or opportunity to develop the skills and judgment that engagement in those activities and experiences supply," Professor Bessant said.

The adolescent brain theory was based on neuroscience and the use of diagnostic devices such as magnetic resonance imaging.

But Professor Bessant said such largely materialist interpretations of how the brain worked didn't stand up to scrutiny, given the influence of other factors such as experience and social learning.

"Questioning these claims does matter because many people are drawing on and linking neuro-scientific research to widespread prejudices and myths about young people being incapable of rational thought, self-restraint and good judgment," she said.