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# Understanding and challenging youth offending

Young offenders have been at the very centre of public and policy makers' attention in recent years. Hardly a day will pass without a new media furore over what young people have done or how they are being treated. Society has a complicated relationship with those who break the law, veering between 'retribution' and 'welfare' orientated policy and practice. However, the overall aim is the same: policy-makers, practitioners, members of the public and neighbours living on the same streets and estates as young offenders all want to live in safety. Crime is not just unpleasant – it costs us all money in terms of damage to property, the burden of running the youth justice system and the consequences of intervening with the individuals involved.

Research suggests that the circumstances not only of young offenders themselves but also the lives of their families and their own children will be improved if they can be prevented from offending in the first place or from re-offending if they have already started. Reflecting this, the Quality Protects objectives in relation to youth offending are broad but straightforward, and concentrate on reducing offending in order to maximise young people's quality of life and their life chances. If offending among children in need and children looked after is not addressed, the long term outcomes are poor. Later in life, persistent young offenders have greater problems, for example with unemployment, drug and alcohol misuse, and anxiety and depression. Because of their antisocial behaviour, young offenders cannot get the best out of education or health: hence the thrust of the Quality Protects objectives and the importance attached to the work that can be done by social care staff.

This briefing sets out what the available research evidence tells us about the nature of youth offending and its causes among the general population of young people, and then goes on to review what might help when working with children in need. It focuses on issues that are relevant for social care staff working in particular with children in need or being looked after, groups where Quality Protects aims to increase life chances and reduce offending. Unlike some other areas covered by these Quality Protects research briefings, the research field from which we can draw is vast and complex, presenting a real challenge in terms of distillation and extraction of key messages. Behind most of the inevitably simplified presentation of research findings given here lies a wealth of complicated detail, and further readings are suggested at the end of the briefing should readers wish to follow up some of the ideas in more depth.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG OFFENDERS AND THEIR BEHAVIOUR

- Youth offending is common among all young people and will inevitably be so among children in need and being looked after. By their mid thirties, around a third of adult men will have a criminal record, with offending behaviour peaking in mid to late-teens. Self-report data show that between 50% and 95% of young people admit breaking the law.

objectives 3 & 4: to ensure that children in need and children looked after gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care and social care  
 sub-objective 3.3: to reduce the rate of offending of children in need  
 sub-objective 4.3: to reduce the rate of offending of children looked after

However, serious and persistent offending only occurs among a minority – between three and six per cent of males in the general population.

- Although the ratio between the sexes has been narrowing, official statistics mainly record crime by young men. For every young woman convicted there are still likely to be three or four times more young men. Self report data show, however, that the ratio for some crimes among the younger groups may be almost equal.
- Studies undertaken in the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden and the USA have all shown that approximately half the offences committed by young men are theft-related. Violence accounts for around 12 per cent.
- Ethnicity is an issue. Young black people are over-represented in the statistics. The reasons are complicated and involve differences in factors such as living conditions and restricted employment opportunities, but they clearly include discrimination from the criminal justice system itself.
- Many young offenders are very likely themselves to be victims of crime and of abuse; the roles of victim and perpetrator are not mutually exclusive.

### **ARE THE PATTERNS OF YOUTH OFFENDING CHANGING?**

This is a particularly difficult question to answer in the UK. There are three main sources of data, none of them satisfactory. Official criminal statistics only record around three per cent of crime; the British Crime Surveys only ask people about their experiences of crime, not about their own offending; and the various surveys of young people (including the two Home Office youth lifestyles surveys) are a rather too recent arrival on the scene to give a true perspective. However, drawing on all these surveys at once, one can be reasonably confident about the following trends.

- Youth crime went up dramatically in the second half of the 20th century but the trends for the last decade or so have shown a levelling out and even, possibly, a drop.
- The sex ratio has been decreasing: although they still account for much less officially recorded crime than young men, young women are figuring more prominently in the statistics than they did twenty or thirty years ago.
- Crimes involving drugs have increased in recent decades.
- In some recent years, there have been some rises in violent crime by young people (including robbery). However, notwithstanding media reports to the contrary, the overall picture between, for example, 1990 and 2000 is not very consistent, and robberies continue to account for only 2.4 per cent of offences in the official statistics. Violent crime remains a relatively small part of the overall picture, but whether it is increasing or not is nonetheless a justifiable cause for concern.

### **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE CAUSES**

Around thirty years of follow-up research in the USA and the UK have led to the consolidation of what is known about the causes of antisocial behaviour and youth offending. Features of (a) early social and family life such as harsh or inconsistent parenting, (b) individual predispositions such as hyperactivity, temperament and lower IQ, and (c) community and society-level factors such as poverty and neighbourhood characteristics, all play a role. Sometimes the factors are important as causes in their own right, but

sometimes they are important only indirectly. In the case of poverty, for example, it may be that they operate by making it more difficult for parents to parent effectively rather than amounting to a direct cause. We also know that these factors act together in a complex way – the pattern includes both nature and nurture.

Some children are more resilient than others, even if they experience the same patterning of risk factors, and the literature is beginning to point to a number of protective factors, specifically associated with certain known risks, which might be helping them. The evidence here is not yet very extensive, but the factors that may protect children include higher intellectual ability, positive school experiences and having fewer delinquent peers. The literature also contains examples of ‘turning points’, such as moving out of a neighbourhood, which might interrupt the flow from risk factors to delinquency. Michael Rutter, the leading researcher in this field, has argued that it is not just the ‘individual factors’ that count, but the ‘processes’ – the ways that things develop, that is, what we might call the ‘knock-on’ effects. He has thus concluded that in order to try to increase resilience, we need to work to reduce or interrupt negative chain reactions, and to increase positive chain reactions by opening up opportunities.

The work that has been done on identifying risk and protective factors has shed light on some different types of antisocial behaviour, particularly on one group whose problems start early and persist throughout life, and another group where risks do not seem to be particularly prominent until the teenage years. We might want to think differently about how to intervene with certain groups of young people depending on what we know about the longer term outcomes for different patterns of risk factors.

When considering early intervention, practitioners are faced with the problem that many of the risk factors do not specially predict offending as the main outcome. They also indicate a range of other poor outcomes, so that children with the full deck of risk factors are likely to have all sorts of other overlapping needs, for example problems relating to drugs and mental health. Understanding and being prepared to tackle multiple need is a key aspect of addressing antisocial behaviour in children in need and in children looked after.

#### **DEVELOPING A MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE**

In policy and practice terms, youth justice in England and Wales has not been ignored in recent years. The system received an almost unprecedented overhaul with the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*, the *Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999*, and the *Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001*. A number of useful summaries of the changes are available, both on the Youth Justice Board (YJB) website (see ‘useful resources’), and in existing briefings, such as those by NACRO (see ‘policy and practice guidance’). It is particularly important to note that a whole raft of new sentences has been introduced including many based on principles of restorative justice and involvement of parents. There is also a strong emphasis on the importance of rehabilitation in the community, including the introduction of mixed custody/community sentences. However, the rates of incarceration of children remain of great concern.

There are three important things to note here. The first is that the Quality Protects objectives that are relevant for youth offending now need to sit

alongside six key objectives of the reformed (multi-agency) youth justice system; again, further information about these can be found on the Youth Justice Board website. Those most relevant for this Briefing include pursuing interventions which tackle the risk factors associated with offending, reinforcing parental responsibility for young people, and encouraging reparation by young offenders to victims. Second, the overall focus of the new youth justice system is now, in what amounts to quite a revolution, the prevention of offending. The main implication of this is that the work of social care workers in early intervention and prevention of social exclusion (for example, through Sure Start programmes, the preventative element of the Children's Fund and the Connexions service) is very much in line with the whole thrust of youth justice. Third, the reforms have seen the establishment of 154 Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) spread across the country and in touch – at least in theory – with all young offenders who are involved in the criminal justice system. The YOTs oversee a wide range of new YJB programmes for young offenders, and results of a national evaluation on their introduction have identified strengths and challenges for the new system as it beds down. The issue for local authorities is partly to ensure that there is consistency between what all the various agencies are trying to achieve with regard to the groups of children most in need of support. A number of different but related strategy documents now exist, such as Children's Services Plans, QP MAPs, youth justice plans and strategies of other relevant agencies such as the police, probation and health authorities. We need to ensure that they do not contradict or work against each other.

## what helps

Rates of youth offending are likely to be higher among populations of children in need. Research shows that they are higher in people who come from families where the parents are very young or where the family is very large, where there is curtailment of education, high rates of poverty, dependency on social security, lack of social support, repeated separations or high levels of family discord. These factors are common in the families who form the majority of the caseload for social care workers. However, there is little research that directly addresses crime by children in need, nor of the problems of managing youth offending by children being looked after. We can draw lessons, nonetheless, from what we do know about what works with young offenders in general. The next sections suggest ways in which social care staff might be able to begin to address some of the problems they come across, in order to meet the relevant QP objectives listed at the outset.

### **KNOWING THE FEATURES OF GOOD INTERVENTIONS**

A lot of work is done in the name of intervening with young offenders. Some of it is useful, some not so. After some decades of research in this area, it is possible to distil the main features of programmes that have at least a fighting chance to make a difference to antisocial behaviour. In order to know where to direct people, how to direct funds, and how to build links with useful programmes, it is useful for social care staff to be aware of these features.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMES TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

- They are based on a clear theoretical model of how they are meant to change behaviour.
- There needs to be a clear focus for all the activity involved in the programme. Everyone should know what it is hoped the outcome will be, and this should be specific and measurable (eg: preventing the child from re-offending, improving child/parent communication).
- They last for a reasonable length of time. Six months is usually necessary if they are to have a chance of making a difference.
- They need to have reasonably frequent contact with the young people. As a rule of thumb this is often suggested to be around twice a week although it depends very much on the type of work being done and the needs of the child.
- The programme should be focusing on rewarding positive behaviour rather than on meting out punishment. Psychological experiments have shown that rewards are more likely than punishment to change behaviour.
- Following-through the intervention with some aftercare also seems to be beneficial.

Interventions can be targeted at the child, at the family, or at the community as a whole (including school based interventions). Here are some examples of programmes in each of these categories that have had good reports.

- **Social skills and problem-solving skills training**, sometimes run in young offenders institutions, and often purchased 'off the peg' from the people or organisations who designed the programme – considerations which tend to encourage programme integrity.
- **Cognitive behavioural programmes**. These are tools from clinical psychology and were developed primarily for helping people with depression. They work by modifying the thinking biases people have, through a process of challenging their assumptions and making them think about factual evidence, so that they can understand the origins and likely outcomes of their behaviour (the programmes designed by psychologist James McGuire, at Liverpool University are a good example). As with social skills and problem-solving training, methods of delivery can include the use of role-play, videotape modelling and feedback, individual and group sessions, and the setting of homework tasks. For a summary of the underlying principles and how they work in relation to young offenders, see the NACRO briefing listed at the end of this paper.
- **Parent training programmes**. These aim to teach parents specific child management skills, to reinforce socially acceptable behaviour and to help parents discipline their children more effectively. This work has developed particularly out of American work including that of the Oregon Social Learning Center. The research support for this type of approach is perhaps strongest in relation to work with young children. It also seems that interventions with parents and children together work better than with either separately.
- **Multimodal interventions** such as multi-systemic therapy, which seek to address the full range of risk factors that encourage and perpetuate the

problem behaviour. MST is an intensive treatment at home, over a four to six month period. Closely supervised therapists work in small teams and are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Randomised control trials by the developers of MST have shown that if it is delivered properly, it can result in long term changes in the behaviour of young offenders. Independent trials are underway.

- **Treatment foster care** Particularly relevant for young people who have to live away from home, TFC is an extension of parent-mediated programmes. Working in conjunction with service providers, the trained, supervised and supported foster carers play a central role in a programme of treatment and rehabilitation. In addition, the child receives individual therapy and is often taught problem-solving skills and anger management.
- **Programmes targeted at communities**, such as the Communities that Care programme, currently being piloted in the UK. Community interventions are often directed towards 'pre-delinquency' in that they set out to prevent the development of problems, rather than to intervene when they surface. Follow-ups of very young children in the American High/Scope project showed reduced rates of arrest at age 27.
- **New youth justice interventions** Among the most popular of these are mentoring and restorative justice. The latter in particular represents the adoption over recent years of elements of justice systems from other countries into the UK's systems, emphasising reintegration into the community and development of personal responsibility. Generally, research has supported the introduction of these new ways of dealing with young offenders. At the time of writing, the final results of major new national trials in the UK (funded by the Youth Justice Board) are awaited.

Combinations of approaches can also be key to successful intervention. For example, in one trial, a combination of parent training and children's problem-solving skills showed the best one-year outcome.

## WHAT HELPS IN SOCIAL CARE PRACTICE

- Learn to spot the key antecedents of serious antisocial behaviour. This list is not definitive, but most researchers would agree that the key factors predicting the development of later problem behaviour include: children who are difficult to manage from a very early age; children who show signs of being hyperactive; children born to teenage parents; children in families where other members are known to the police; parents who are inconsistent, harsh or punitive when they try to control the behaviour of their children; families where there is a history of physical abuse or neglect; families where there are lots of stressors and life events and limited personal or material resources to help deal with them; children who get into trouble with the police very early, perhaps before age 10; young people who have very few opportunities to feel worthwhile or needed by anyone; young people whose friends encourage them to join in with antisocial behaviour.
- On the other hand, remember that most young people grow out of any antisocial behaviour and the other people they meet in their lives will have a positive role to play in this, particularly their partners and children. It is important that we do not deal with offenders with too heavy a hand, and do not catch them up unnecessarily in a system that itself has been shown to

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perpetuate antisocial behaviour. Young people are resilient and adaptive. There is much to be positive about in terms of the possibilities for their futures.

- Act quickly and in as benign a way as possible, at least at the outset, by offering contacts and resources that will not stigmatise or alienate the family. Put them in touch with parenting support in your area and try to find things for the young people to be involved in. Always try to build on the positive. If there are things that are working for the family, things that they do enjoy doing with their child, persuade them to do them more often.
- Aim to help families and other agencies to foster and bolster protective factors in the young peoples' lives. Key adults in the family can perhaps become mentors and a substitute for shortfalls in parenting. While it is often a source of stress and exclusion, education also has a role in providing positive experiences and much needed structure.
- That said, appreciate the limits of what can be achieved. We know that on average interventions only tend to reduce reoffending by around 10-12 per cent. Serious or persistent offending is an entrenched behaviour that in some way serves a positive purpose for the individual concerned. You are unlikely, on your own, to turn it around. This is not to say that some progress cannot be made. Rather, small progress should be regarded as very important.
- Develop strong working links between YOTs, social services and education. Be familiar with the working arrangements and key assessment and intervention tools of others working in neighbouring fields, and share yours with them. Many of your young people will be known to the YOT, who will have important information that might be shared rather than duplicated. For example, the YOTs are using an assessment and planning tool called the ASSET, which covers some of the same ground as the Assessment Framework. Set up links that can be drawn on when quick responses are needed as crises (such as arrests and remand in custody) arise. Make arrangements for sharing information as and when necessary.
- Train staff and other care providers to manage and change antisocial behaviour, particularly those who work in residential care. Anticipate that you will have to deal with young people who break the law and that the best thing for them, and for everyone else, is to interrupt their career path and get them on to a different track. Be prepared and have some tools (skills and contacts) up your sleeve so that you do not feel caught out.
- Tackle the behaviour. Obviously, much of the actual 'tackling' happens within the criminal justice system. The role of social care staff in this regard will mostly involve building up links with the YOT, getting to know some key people, and visiting some of the YJB intervention programmes in your area. Learn about referring to these programmes (referrals can often be made from outside the YOT) and visit the relevant websites listed on the next page. Within the family, supporting and training parents is a key factor in tackling the behaviour. Both the Trust for the Study of Adolescence and the National Family and Parenting Institute provide useful resources and links for parenting support. In addition, learn about out-of-school programmes and leisure opportunities for disadvantaged and at-risk young people in your area. Distraction can work just as well with teenagers as with very young children as a way of tackling poor behaviour.

## KEY TEXTS

### RESEARCH

Coleman J and Roker D (2001) *Supporting the parents of teenagers: A handbook for professionals*. Jessica Kingsley

Farrington D (1995) The Twelfth Jack Tizard Memorial Lecture: The development of offending and antisocial behaviour from childhood: Key findings from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36, 929-64

Flood-Page C, Campbell S, Harrington V and Miller J (2000) *Youth crime: Findings from the 1998/99 Youth Lifestyles Survey*. Home Office Research Study 209. London: Home Office

Goldson B (2000) *The New Youth Justice*. Russell House Publishing

Rutter M, Giller H and Hagell A (1998) *Antisocial behaviour by young people*. Cambridge University Press

### POLICY AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE

NACRO briefing papers on Youth Crime, available on the NACRO website ([www.nacro.org.uk](http://www.nacro.org.uk)), in particular those on:

'Using cognitive behavioural approaches with children and young people who offend'

'A brief outline of the youth justice system in England and Wales as at December 2001'

'Looked after children and youth justice (anomalies in the law)'

'The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000: Implications for the youth justice system'

Policy Action Team. *Report 12 - Young People*. Social Exclusion Unit, March 2000. Download from [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/published.htm](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/published.htm)

### USEFUL RESOURCES

Home Office Crime Statistics ([www.crimereduction.gov.uk/sta\\_index.htm](http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/sta_index.htm))

Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate ([www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm))

National Family and Parenting Institute ([www.nfpi.org.uk](http://www.nfpi.org.uk))

National Youth Agency ([www.nya.org.uk](http://www.nya.org.uk))

On Track ([www.homeoffice.gov.uk/cpd/fmpu/ontrack.htm](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/cpd/fmpu/ontrack.htm))

Parenting Education and Support Forum ([www.parenting-forum.org.uk](http://www.parenting-forum.org.uk)), which includes an information service for members

Sure Start ([www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk))

Trust for the Study of Adolescence ([www.tsa.uk.com](http://www.tsa.uk.com)) including Teenagers in Trouble: skills for parents. Video and Support Pack, TSA, 2000

Youth Justice Board website and annual reports ([www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk](http://www.youth-justice-board.gov.uk))

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This Briefing has been independently and anonymously reviewed by an academic and a practitioner with special interest in services in youth justice and anti-social behaviour. For a fully referenced version, visit the **research in practice** website:

[www.rip.org.uk/mainmenu.html?publications/qpb/index.html](http://www.rip.org.uk/mainmenu.html?publications/qpb/index.html)

