

Outside the Gates, Outside the Law?

Tim Martin and Carol Hayden discuss the association between crime and exclusion from school.

"By 2002 all excluded pupils will be offered a full time education rather than the cursory few hours a week that was all too common in the past. Excluded pupils will continue their education rather than causing havoc on the streets." Jacqui Smith, School Minister, 1 August 2000.

Exclusion from school

Exclusion from school has been a high profile issue over the last decade as the numbers recorded as permanently excluded from school have risen from around 3,000 in the early 1990s to over 12,000 in 1997-1998. The latest figures (for the 1998-1999 school year) show a 15 per cent reduction to 10,400 (or 0.14 per cent of the school population). In addition to providing full-time education for excluded pupils by 2002, the government has put forward a target of achieving a reduction in permanent exclusion and truancy of one third by 2002. However, many more children are sent home from school at lunchtimes or for fixed periods of a day or more. Furthermore non-attendance in its various forms (which includes truancy) is a much bigger issue than exclusion from school.

Poor educational attainment has long been known to be a feature of the prison population and the propensity of young people to get into trouble is not new. Indeed, it is estimated that something like one in five secondary pupils has committed a criminal offence in the

last twelve months. The most common offence is dodging fares on buses, trains and tubes. However, the Youth Justice Board (March 2000) maintains that excluded pupils are more likely to be involved in criminal activity regularly, with these activities being of a more serious nature than for pupils attending school. This makes pupils at risk of exclusion a particularly important target group in crime reduction programmes. The Labour government's crime reduction strategy recognises this in one of its key action points.

Exclusion and offending behaviour

It seems obvious that once children and young people are outside the school gates during the school day and unsupervised by adults, opportunities for them to break the law are multiplied. The evidence for the association between being out of school and in trouble with the police seems compelling. A recent survey by MORI for the Youth Justice Board (March 2000) found that nearly three quarters of young people excluded from school admitted to committing an offence in the previous 12 months. The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) (2000) reported that young people commit 50 per cent more crimes in the year after they are excluded from school in comparison with the year prior to their exclusion. The Metropolitan Police has estimated that a large proportion of crimes are committed by 10 to 16 year olds, many during school hours: 40 per cent of all robberies, 25 per cent of burglaries and 20 per cent of all thefts in the London area.

Criminal offending is not the only problem. The Policy Action Team Eight (March 2000) reported on the worrying and widespread problem of antisocial behaviour where many of the more insidious problems are said to germinate. Hayden and Martin's (1998) comparative study of young people's experiences of crime and nuisance clearly illustrates how criminal and antisocial behaviours appear to go hand-in-hand with school exclusion and non-attendance. Young people who had been excluded from school were shown to be more likely to have committed a range of offences and

antisocial acts than those who had not. Indeed, all those excluded had committed at least one offence in the past year, the most common being assault with 72 per cent of excluded individuals reporting this. They were also more likely to have been offered or taken illegal drugs than their non-excluded peers and four times as likely to have knowledge of where to obtain them.

Multiple problems

A similar pattern emerged in a study of persistent young offenders (Martin et al, 1999) which found that nearly eight out of ten had been excluded from school and seven out of ten had evidence of attendance problems. However, treating associations between crime and being out of school as causal is too simplistic. In reality it is clear that these young people have multiple problems, many of which are unrelated to schooling. For example, 93 per cent of these persistent young offenders had social services involvement suggesting broader family based problems.

Special educational needs as well as a range of home and community based problems necessitating the involvement of a range of support agencies feature strongly in a recent study which follows through the secondary education of pupils originally excluded from primary school (Parsons et al, 2000). This study found that those with a record of poor attendance were twice as likely to offend as others and those known to be offenders had 50 per cent more permanent exclusions than other pupils who were not known to be offenders. Those with special educational needs were more likely to have problems with attendance and offending. For around half of these children who were excluded from primary school (often only for a matter of days at the start of the period of monitoring) problems intensified. On the other hand, in a third of cases their situation did improve, although 'success' had to be seen very much as a relative concept and essentially fragile in terms of stability.

Conducting a range of projects in this field over a number of years and reading well over a thousand files on children in difficulty has



given the authors extensive knowledge of the factors surrounding such cases. One thing is very clear: time out of school and criminal behaviour is nearly always part of a much bigger story, one of multiple problems, whether school, family or home-based.

The teaching profession has borne the brunt of the additional stresses of meeting government targets for reducing exclusion and non-attendance. Certain teaching unions have blamed an apparent rise in classroom violence on targets to reduce the number of exclusions, with violent pupils still in school when they should have been excluded. It should be noted that some of the reasons that young people are excluded from school could be considered to be criminal in the 'real world', whereas within the school context they may be viewed as merely 'bad behaviour'. Not surprisingly parents are reported to be concerned. The Times Educational Supplement's Millennium Poll (December 1999) showed that parents rated disruptive and badly behaved pupils as the second biggest problem facing Britain's schools after lack of finances and resources.

What can be done?

Many interventions, both inside and outside of schools, have claimed to be effective in reducing

exclusion and difficult behaviour in young people. The evidence suggests that alternative programmes and individual support can be successful with some young people completing their education and achieving exam passes at GCSE or NVQ (National Vocational Qualification). Clearly, the amount and quality of education young people have will be limited if they are rarely in school and hence attainment is likely to be negatively affected. This is especially important to remember when school attainment as well as attendance is known to be a protective factor against criminal and delinquent behaviour and other adverse circumstances. There is growing recognition of the need for different provision for some pupils during Key Stage 4 (ages 15 and 16). More vocational training, work placements, as well as part-time attendance at further education colleges for certain pupils are already a reality in some schools. By 2002 over 1,000 new learning support units will be established in mainstream schools to help support pupils who are deemed to be at risk of exclusion.

NACRO has shown that diversionary schemes that occupy young people help cut youth crime. Similarly, appropriate activities and curricula help keep pupils in school (or at least in education) and interested in learning. There needs to

be a fundamental change in the education service which enables schools, together with a range of support services, to provide a full-time education which meets the needs of all young people. If young people attend full-time and appropriate education they should have less time and opportunity to become involved (or more involved) in criminal and delinquent behaviour.

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