

Research into Practice - working with children and young people who offend

Gillian Kelly and Bernadette Wilkinson describe an approach to training that uses research-based models to develop common understandings in Youth Offending Teams.

The principal aim of the new system of youth justice, preventing offending, goes beyond the traditional aims of the range of agencies who now carry what Jack Straw described as a shared responsibility for achieving that aim. It goes beyond containment, welfare, punishment, deterrence, and education. It suggests a more dynamic, forward-looking approach to work with young people who offend, with an emphasis upon change. The approach depends upon professionals working together to produce a coherent, multi-faceted programme of services and interventions.

Significant strides have been made to provide legislative, policy and practice frameworks to support the types of development envisaged by the Home Secretary. The range of centrally led and promoted measures will not, of themselves, produce the shared sense of purpose necessary to enable all contributors to the youth justice system to work together in effective partnership. For this to develop a common understanding of young people and their offending is required, as a basis for meaningful dialogue amongst all those involved.

Working with YOTs

This article is based on our work with Youth Justice/Youth Offending Teams and their partners over the past four years. We have found that goodwill exists, as does an impressive range of skills and knowledge derived from the range

of backgrounds represented in YOTs (Youth Offending Teams) and their partners. There is some suspicion and anxiety about different professional perspectives, but more positive appreciation of the skills and knowledge of others. The challenge for us, has been to find ways of building on those strengths at this early stage in the development of YOTs. We have found that one very important component is for teams to share a conceptual base that helps all the team members to understand the variety of potential contributions to reducing offending, in a context which holds them together coherently.

In working with teams we have drawn upon research to identify a range of models for understanding offending and offered them, in modified forms, as practical research-based frameworks and tools. These can be used to inform and structure analysis and discussion. They promote common conceptualisations about how young people offend, why they do, and what different agencies can do to prevent them offending in the future. It is our belief that as these common conceptualisations develop, so too will interventions that are owned and valued by all contributors to the new system.

A research based model

We want to focus here upon one example - a research-based model described by Rutter, Giller and Hagell in *Anti-Social Behaviour by Young People* (see illustration).

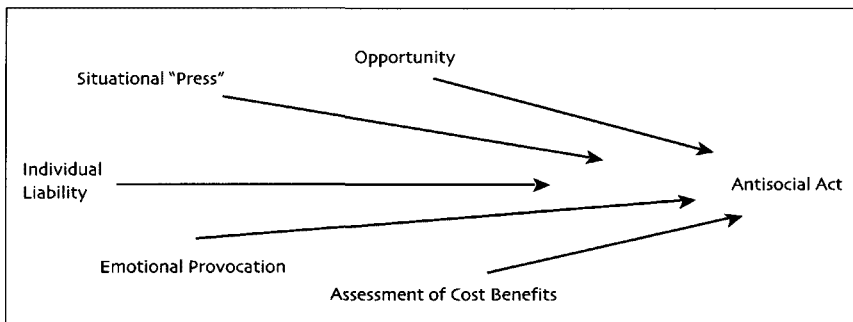
The model is a schematic representation of the processes leading to crime and includes both individual and situational factors, which the authors of this book use to examine a range of preventive and intervening strategies.

We have used this model to develop a framework which YOT members and others can use to aid dynamic offence-focused assessment. This is particularly pertinent as consistent and accurate assessment is an essential prerequisite of effective intervention and planning in YOTs, recognised in the use of the common assessment tool, ASSET, the design of which reflects the research base gathered together by Rutter et al.

The framework starts from the premise that at the heart of any work with children or young people who offend, lies the individual and the path to his/her offence. This dynamic is the *raison d'être* for any involvement of the youth justice system in that individual's life and change-directed assessment must be directed towards understanding with some accuracy his/her 'pathway' to offending behaviour. It is the journey that culminates in the offence and the factors that influence the course of that journey which the framework seeks to capture.

Each individual will bring with them a range of influences likely to predispose or protect them from offending. They will also have committed a specific offence that will have certain characteristics. The framework addresses the question - why did this particular person commit this particular offence?

As with any journey a number of factors will influence how we reach our destination. Using the framework we can map the complexities of the individual's choice of destination, the offence, and make specific rather than generalised causal links between aspects of the young person and their environment and his/her behaviour.



Model described by Rutter, Giller and Hagell in *Anti-Social Behaviour by Young People*, Cambridge University Press 1998

The impact on practice

The idea of a journey towards a particular offence or group of offences suggests to assessors a moving dynamic picture and the model provides them with shared language with which to discuss the developing assessment. It is also captures the whole picture, not simply the individual factors which influence offending (the traditional province of social workers and probation officers), but also factors which fall within the ambit of other agencies such as schools, the police, community safety initiatives. For this reason it is particularly suited to the needs of multi-disciplinary YOTs, particularly if used as part of the process of the development of shared team approaches and understandings of assessment and intervention. Since the map is a holistic one it can identify targets for intervention beyond the traditional territory of work with young people. The framework includes for example a consideration of opportunity features, affecting the likelihood of a particular offending journey. It can prompt different discussions with a young person and different information becoming part of the currency of a YOT team. Our experience has been that it can help YOT workers from a variety of settings make sense of their own contribution, value and understand the contribution of others and perhaps most significantly see how

those contributions fit together. By making precise and explicit individual causal links, it can help ensure that Orders are more accurately focused to reflect the principal aim of preventing future offending. It may help to avoid a blanket approach and facilitate the best use of the new orders. At the heart of the map is the individual young person and he/she can only benefit from an approach which is both holistic and accurate.

This, and other research based models which we have adapted for practical use, can help those working in youth justice develop common approaches to assessment and analysis which, in turn, produce more coherent and focused interventions with the

potential to make a real difference to the lives of children and young people.

Gillian Kelly and Bernadette Wilkinson both worked for many years as probation officers and managers. They are now working as independent trainers, under the shared logo KWP, and have undertaken a range of training and development work with YOTs, including the national ASSET training programme.

References:

Rutter, Giller and Hagell (1998), *Antisocial Behaviour by Young People*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

'S' Bends, a short television drama made with homeless young people in Birmingham by Hi8us Projects, is about young men stealing cars and racing them around the 'S' Bends in Birmingham city centre. The storyline came out of drama workshops with the participants who also play the main characters.

Hi8us Projects works with young people at risk of social exclusion, developing projects which enable them to tell their own stories, learn new skills and access opportunities in employment and education. Previous successful dramas include *The Visit*, made with young prisoners at Hull Prison. 'S' Bends can be seen on Carlton Television as part of the First Cut screening on Friday November 3rd from 11.30pm. Hi8us Projects can be contacted at hi8us@becomm.co.uk and 01323 815705.