

# editorial

## youth and crime

Rob Allen puts this issue into perspective.

“Which is best, to pay for the policeman or the schoolmaster – the prison or the school?”

The question is as relevant to youth crime policy today as when first posed in the *Times* in 1867. The creation of a Children's Minister in the Education Department and the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* have given encouragement to the children's charities who would see young offenders dealt with first and foremost as children in trouble.

By contrast, the Government's crackdown on anti-social behaviour announced in October reflects a less tolerant approach. It is the wide range of possible policies and practices towards children in conflict with the law which forms the subject matter for this issue of CJM.

New Labour's youth justice reforms were triggered in part by the 1996 Audit Commission report *Misspent Youth*.

**Judy Renshaw** reports on the Commission's latest look at what has been achieved in the last six years. They have found a much improved system but with room for greater emphasis on serious and persistent cases, more victim involvement in restorative justice, more interventions which systematically meet the assessed needs of offenders and more efforts to communicate with the public. The reforms have been driven centrally by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and locally by the Youth Offending Teams (YOTs).

YJB member Howard Williamson argues that the pragmatic and balanced approach towards the prevention and treatment of delinquency has delivered real impact. Although the legislative and philosophical framework of youth justice may be open to criticism, the YJB has succeeded in securing resources for community based work with young offenders and developed

a range of prevention programmes aimed at children most at risk of crime.

**Emma Wincup** and **Susan Downey** describe one such prevention programme, 'Getting it Right', in which police officers go into primary schools to talk to the pupils. Widely welcomed by all concerned, the project raises hard questions about the impact of the scheme on offending and questions whether it is either right or a good use of resources for the police as opposed to other agencies to be doing this work. The project did have the unanticipated benefit of improving police community relations.

**Michelle Whitworth** reports on a more unusual project in the North East that tries to improve relations between the generations, with older people and year 10 pupils undertaking joint activities over the summer holidays.

Such practical initiatives can do much to counter the unremittingly negative perceptions of young people and their behaviour that are pumped out by the tabloid press.

**Steve Taylor** questions whether current political concern about young people's involvement in anti-social behaviour is anything more than an old fashioned moral panic. His argument that youth crime problems need to be kept in perspective and in context are backed by **Craig Webber's** study in a relatively deprived outer London town. This found that anti-social attitudes among young people often sit alongside much more conventional aspirations such as the desire to find well paid work. Most adolescent disaffection does not manifest itself in fully blown subculture but can nonetheless be subject to the same process of labelling by the police and even schools.

According to **Anthony Gunter** this is particularly true

of black youngsters, whom are often talked about in a generalised way as if they are all potential or actual perpetrators of, say, the violent gun crime committed by a tiny minority. **Bea Campbell** takes a different view, arguing that policy does not take enough account of the realities of violence and anti-social behaviour and ignores the crucial dimension of male violence against women particularly in the family home.

Although policy may indeed stress private pathologies at the expense of social structures, there are still questions about how best to deal with those young people who do become serious or persistent offenders.

The debate continues about what if any role should be played by imprisonment. In the USA, huge numbers of ethnic minority children are held in large institutions. **James Bell** writes about the carefully targeted work of the Burns Institute to reduce this disproportionate confinement. In the UK, the Howard League has long campaigned for an end to prison custody for juveniles altogether. **Frances Crook** describes the impact that litigation has had on the way children are locked up, by establishing that the Children Act applies to children in custody and challenging the use of segregation and other practices designed with the adult prison population in mind. **Juliet Lyon** acknowledges improvements in prison conditions for under 18s but criticises the Government's failure to deliver much change for 18-20 year olds, many of whom are every bit as vulnerable as their younger counterparts. **David Wilson's** research on the experiences of young black men in custody shows that few are aware of the official channels for making complaints about treatment. They are forced to develop coping strategies, mostly 'keeping quiet' but in times of crisis 'going nuts'.

There is no greater crisis than that which drives a young person to take their own life. **Paul Cavadino** thinks that the death of 16 year old Joseph Scholes in Stoke Heath YO1 in 2002 raises fundamental issues which should be investigated in a public inquiry. Chief among these is the role of punishment with young people. For him courts should not be asking how much

punishment to mete out but what good a sentence will do. It was the death of a young boy in police custody that provided the impetus for radical reform of child justice in South Africa. **Rob Allen** describes the current child justice bill that would divert many youngsters out of the criminal system. Political concerns are at present serving to stall the passing of legislation which might be characterised as soft on crime. The diversionary approach in Scotland's system of children's hearings is coming under political pressure too. **Maggie Mellon** explains how NCH Scotland have been reviewing the continuing relevance of the principles put forward by Lord Kilbrandon thirty years ago.

Interestingly, the YMCA's work to identify young people's views in Britain has found that alongside prevention measures young people want harsher punishments for young offenders and their parents. For example suspension and exclusion from school is seen as a holiday. More schooling should be used as a response to crime not less. A greater role for young people in policy making could have other surprising consequences.

**Tony Jeffs** argues that should the voting age in Britain come down to 16 – something currently being considered by the Electoral Commission – a separate youth justice system for people above that age would turn out to be unsustainable.

If the most serious and chronic young offenders are not to be locked up, intensive projects will be needed to provide education support, supervision and treatment in the community. **Jeremy Lindsey** manages the Youth Advocacy Programme (YAP) which runs a number of intensive supervision and surveillance projects for juveniles at risk of custody. Recruiting local people as advocates – mentors available to youngsters 24/7, YAP provide individualised 'wrap around' activities which put right the things that have gone wrong in a child's life. This surely is the best way to respond to serious juvenile crime whether or not you consider its perpetrators as troubled or troublesome or both.