

# The Audit Commission's Review of the Youth Justice System

Judy Renshaw introduces the first comprehensive review of the recent youth justice reforms, including an analysis of 'Yots' and the YJB.

The Audit Commission first examined the youth justice system in 1996, leading to the report, *Misspent Youth*. Since then the system has undergone major changes, including the creation of the Youth Justice Board (YJB), the development of multi-agency Youth Offending Teams ('Yots') in all areas of England and Wales and various new disposals and court orders.

The recently completed study, published in December (Audit Commission, 2003), was the first comprehensive review of the reforms so far and was carried out in conjunction with the National Audit Office (NAO), whose remit includes the YJB and the prison service. The NAO has published a separate report, linked to the Audit Commission's. The review had two main aims – to assess the effectiveness of the reformed system in preventing offending and re-offending by young people, and to identify the best way to structure and manage the agencies. The research involved:

- visits to Yots, courts and other agencies in eight areas;
- analysis of YJB and Home Office data;
- surveys of all Yot managers and 400 magistrates;
- surveys of police officers and chief constables;
- analysis of 300 Yot case files;
- analysis of 1000 newspaper articles about youth crime;
- interviews with 41 young offenders and 32 parents; and
- an associated public opinion survey.

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Overall, the new system is a considerable improvement on the old one. Young people are more likely to receive an intervention after they are caught by the police, and to make amends for what they have done (MORI, 2003).

Persistent young offenders are sentenced in half the time they were previously and magistrates are generally very satisfied with the service they receive from Yots. The structural arrangements have also improved. The YJB sets a clear national framework and takes a lead in developing policy and monitoring progress, while the 155 Yots are locally accountable to both criminal justice and children's services.

Although things are moving in the right direction, more could be done in a number of areas. Public concern about youth crime remains high and public confidence in the youth justice system is low, despite the fact that overall crime is falling and the number of young people offending has not changed.

Three out of four people have never heard of Youth Offending Teams so more could be done to raise public knowledge locally and nationally. Compared with 1997, the rates of reconviction for young offenders given reprimands or final warnings in 2001 have fallen (Jennings, 2003). But compared with ten years ago, fewer receive these pre-court disposals. This

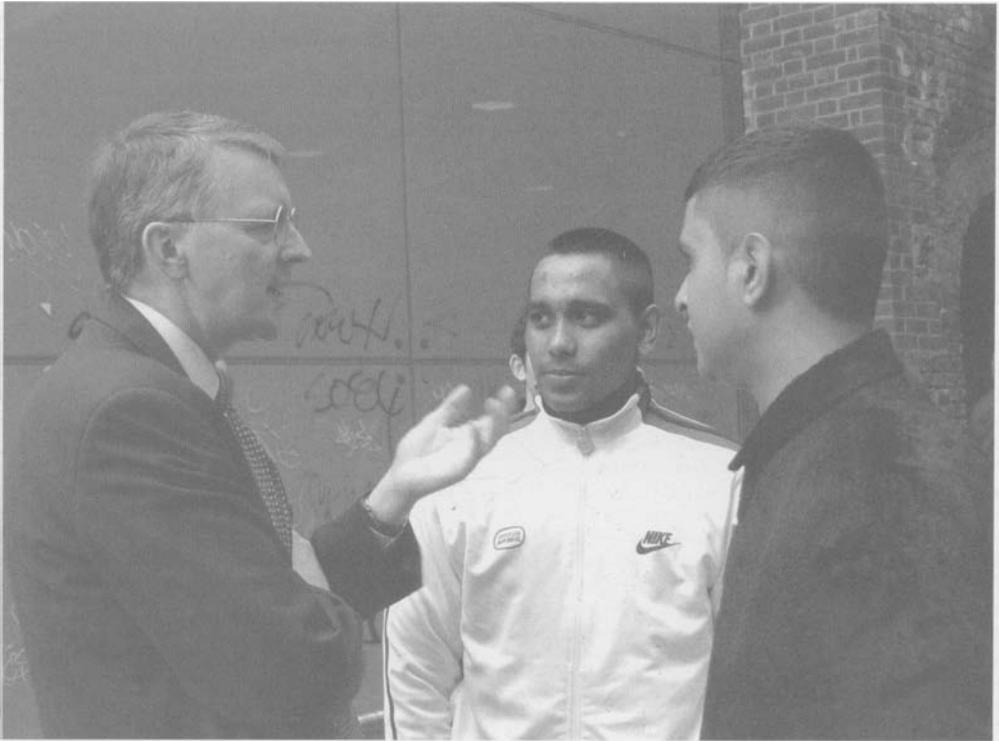
means that more minor offences are now reaching court, which is not the best use of scarce resources.

Resources could be saved by allowing the CPS to divert first time offenders to the next stage of Youth Offender Panels and re-directed to improve the response to the most serious and persistent offenders.

Only one in five young offenders on bail now offend, compared with one in three in 1996, probably the result of the introduction of bail support and supervision packages in all areas as well as faster sentencing. However, large numbers are still remanded to secure facilities, especially black and mixed race young people and the difference between ethnic groups has widened over the past three years.

Referral orders, introduced in April 2002, have opened up a whole new approach to dealing with first time offenders appearing in court and constitute nearly 30 per cent of all the sentences given to young offenders. The young offender meets a panel comprising a cross-section of the local community and a contract is drawn up. The panel monitors progress at intervals, providing continuity that is rarely possible in court. However, the quality of referral orders varies locally and in many cases there are significant delays before panel meetings take place. This would be reduced if the CPS were able to impose three month referral orders directly. Where victims become involved in referral orders, this is beneficial for all concerned but, in most areas, few victims participate.

The reconviction rates for young offenders sentenced to the new action plan orders and reparation orders have also fallen compared with 1997, but the rates for those subject to the older, more serious community penalties have not. This may be due to that fact that the average contact time for the latter group is little more than it was seven years ago (1.1 hours per week, on average, compared with one hour per week in 1996). Custody is expensive and relatively ineffective in reducing offending. Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programmes (ISSPs), introduced in 2001 as an alternative for persistent young offenders, are better at meeting their needs. A six month programme costs £8,500 compared with £27,000 for the same period in custody and those who successfully complete them appear to commit fewer offences. Although the rate of custodial sentencing has reduced since their introduction, ISSPs on their own have not had a direct effect on reducing the use of custody. They need to be used within a wider strategy that makes them the main sentence for persistent young offenders in the most serious cases and magistrates need to be provided with better information about ISSPs when they are proposed by Yots. Improving public knowledge about youth crime and the youth justice system might also help to reduce the use of custody.



Julie Grogan

*Hilary Benn MP with youth mentors at the launch of ICCP (Intensive Change and Control Programme, designed for young offenders over 18 years).*

Yots have a key role in addressing offending and are an effective model of managed multi-agency working. The combination of a national YJB framework and locally managed Yots connecting the criminal justice system, local government and health services appears to work well. However, some aspects of their work could be improved, such as their performance management by steering groups, the quality of the data they collect and its use as management information.

The new assessment system, ASSET, has improved the way that needs and risks of young offenders are assessed but, although usually completed, it is not always used fully to determine the amount and nature of interventions. Although persistent offenders spend more time than others with their supervising officers (1.8 hours per week on average), neither this nor the number of elements in their programmes are clearly related to their identified risks and needs as assessed by ASSET. Yots should work to improve the amount and quality of contact that supervising officers have with young offenders, and should make better use of ASSET to determine programmes and services. Addressing risks and needs depends on gaining access to a range of essential services, but this is more difficult with some than others. We suggest a number of ways in which their needs might be better addressed, including:

- seconding social workers to Yots;
- involving schools more in the work of Yots, possibly through local forums for head teachers;
- convincing health and mental health services of the crucial role they have to play;

- developing more accessible, child-centred substance misuse services; and
- providing increased and more appropriate supported accommodation.

Many young people who end up in custody have a history of professionals failing to listen, assessments not being followed by action and nobody being in charge. If effective early intervention had been provided for just one in ten of these young offenders, annual savings in excess of £100 million could have been made. Targeted and well-managed early intervention programmes can be effective if they are properly coordinated both nationally and locally, such as those managed by Yots. Better still, mainstream agencies, such as schools and health services, should take full responsibility for preventing offending by young people, with youth crime prevention performance targets introduced to provide the necessary incentives.

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#### References

- Audit Commission (2004), *Youth Justice: a review of the reformed system*, London: Audit Commission.
- Jennings, D. (2003), *One Year Juvenile Reconviction Rates: first quarter of 2001 cohort*, London: Home Office.
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