

# Prevention, intervention and representation: the YMCA's work on youth and crime

Jody Baker describes the YMCA's social inclusion work with young people.

**I**t is an unfortunate reality that young people commit crime disproportionately. It is a lesser-known fact that they are also have a disproportionate risk of becoming victims of crime. The YMCA has taken these realities seriously, so preventing the first steps into criminal behaviour is an important part of its work.

Twenty five of the YMCAs in England run specific crime diversion programmes and over 15 run citizenship programmes which supplement awareness-raising activities and discussions as part of wider youth work projects. We also work in Young Offenders Institutions, through our 'Partnerships in Prisons' project.

The YMCA designs its youth programmes with an aim to complement formal education, provide young people with stimulating and challenging activities, and give them an active role in developing and running activities where possible. Youth work is also important in giving young people a sense of direction and purpose. By working with young people who are at risk of social exclusion (or are already socially excluded), YMCAs are able to help 'high risk' or 'hard to reach' groups, playing an important preventative role in reducing youth crime and improving safety.

The range of activities carried out by the YMCAs varies greatly, but the work of the organisation as a whole can be broadly looked at under seven key themes: parenting and family; crime and safety; skills and education; money and work; citizenship and personal development; housing and homelessness; sport, exercise, health and fitness.

## Access All Areas

Access All Areas was created by the YMCA in partnership with the think-tank Charter 88 in 2001, to provide a platform for young people at the political party conferences. Young people from YMCAs across the country were given training on decision-making and public speaking skills as part of the project, and a soapbox on the YMCA stand in the exhibition centre of the conferences attracted an audience of ministers, MPs, local councillors and party officials. We found that in most sessions crime and safety came up as one of the young people's key concerns.

In 2003, the YMCA fringe meetings at the party conferences took the theme of 'Incarcerating young

offenders: is it working?'. As part of the events, former young offenders talked about their experiences to mixed audiences of MPs, delegates, voluntary sector representatives and commentators. The young people were supported by their YMCA youth workers at the events and given prior training and support, as well as the opportunity to experience the wider conference environment.

One of the speakers was 'Jim', who had been sent to prison on 23 occasions from the age of 15 to 23. He was initially sentenced for simple theft and possession of cannabis, but once in custody became addicted to heroin. This led to a very chaotic lifestyle where he stole cars to fund his drug habit and he continually found himself back in prison. Once he worked with the YMCA, however, at HMYOI Onley, he found more of a purpose and is now free of drugs and more positive about his future. He outlined, very eloquently, the damage that the whole process had done to him and was both an excellent illustration of the effectiveness of the programme at Onley, as well as the futile nature of prison to prevent re-offending.

## YSPEAK?

The scale of the YMCA's involvement with the nation's youth is considerable: an estimated 1.1 million young people are reached by or involved with YMCA youth work programmes every year. Over the past three years YMCA England has established two citizenship and participation programmes aimed at connecting young people with politics on every level from local to international levels.

The YSPEAK? project developed out of the success of Access All Areas. Its aim is to get young people involved in politics at local, regional, national, European and international levels. YSPEAK? created a training package and resources to informally educate young people about citizenship and politics, as well as how they can make a difference through getting their voices heard. YSPEAK? has held various residential workshops across the country, including a national residential event, where the participants visited the Houses of Parliament. YSPEAK? supported and trained the seven English delegates for the YMCA European Youth Parliament, held in the Czech Senate Building during the YMCA European Prague 2003 Festival in August. The delegates were all aged between 14-25 years old and were democratically recruited through a process of self-



*Young delegates at the YMCA Youth Parliament, Prague 2003.*

selection. Part of the training included the opportunity to visit the European Parliament in Brussels to meet MEPs and watch a committee in session. The recommendations they took to Prague were created at a residential event in London in July 2003 following issue-based discussions and a series of training sessions on decision-making, citizenship, participation, democratic and political processes, and contemporary issues. The views of young people from across the country who took part in similar events were fed into the process to ensure that the recommendations were representative of the nation's youth.

The resulting recommendations are on areas that the delegates thought were most important to young people: asylum seekers and refugees; crime and education; European youth policy; the future of the European Union; sexuality and teenage pregnancy, and transport and the environment.

The crime and education recommendations are:

- Introduce parenting education for parents of young offenders to induce a sense of responsibility.
- Introduce more preventative measures for young people getting into crime.
- Put a greater emphasis on victims. Part of the offenders' rehabilitation should involve meeting their victims, perhaps introduce a victim realisation scheme.
- Harsher punishments should be given to young offenders and their parents.
- Investigate the process of getting into crime and tackle points along the way, including bullying and truancy. School suspension and exclusion for bullies is not seen as an

effective means of punishment as it gives offenders a 'holiday' from school.

- More schooling should be used as a punishment instead of suspension and exclusion. There needs to be improved relations between young people and the police.
- The focus for tackling drugs should be the drug dealers and there should be co-operation on an international level on this issue.

It is hoped that these recommendations will be presented to Margaret Hodge MP, Minister for Children and Young People.

Citizenship and participation projects like YSpeak? have been particularly inspiring, proving to those involved that young people develop a sense of direction and active citizenship when they have a voice and are meaningfully involved in making decisions that affect their lives and their futures.

*Jody Baker was national coordinator for the YSpeak? Citizenship and participation programme until November 2003.*