

'Getting it Right?': police in primary schools

Emma Wincup and Susan Downey explore the impact of a crime reduction initiative on primary school-aged children.

“I feel like we've done all we can as far as enforcement is concerned. We've got to think about education, how we can deflect these young people from getting involved in crime in the first place.” (Getting it Right Officer)

There is a long-established tradition of police officers visiting primary schools hoping both to prevent future offending and to protect children from victimisation. Typically police officers deliver key messages on topics such as road safety, stranger danger and drug use, either informally through one-off visits from community beat officers or formally through school liaison schemes. Rarely has this important aspect of policing been the focus of any research attention with the few studies available focusing exclusively on the role of the police in delivering drug education programmes (for example, O'Connor *et al*, 1999).

In this short article, we report on the findings of an evaluation of the 'Getting it Right' (GIR) programme delivered to primary school-aged children in one police force area by police officers known as Getting it Right Officers (GIROs). These officers are uniformed and usually released from other police duties.

The programme and the evaluation

The GIR programme was developed in 1995 and is the outcome of partnership working between police and education. Funding for the programme largely comes from the police with education providing some resources for specific tasks, for example to train police officers. The programme aims to keep children safe and addresses three areas: crime reduction, keeping safe, and substance use and misuse. It is delivered by twenty-four GIROs to approximately 95% of primary schools in the force area.

Based on data for 2000/1, we estimated that GIR was established in approximately 615 schools, resulting in approximately 226,000 police contacts with individual pupils. Typically this involves the delivery of a lesson lasting no more than one hour each term. GIR is not designed to be a short-term *intervention* — rather work begins in the reception class and progresses through to year 6. This developmental model is the basis of the GIR programme which consists of a pack of thirty-five age-specific lessons. The pack is divided into six themes covering the following areas:

- Introductory sessions
- Crime reduction sessions
- Keeping safe sessions
- Substance use and misuse sessions
- Skills focus sessions
- Concluding sessions.

Lessons in the pack act as a medium for officers to encourage the acquisition of skills rather than simply impart knowledge. Key messages are reinforced through the concept of five 'Golden Rules' (see below). They convey positive messages and help pupils to realise that they can act to keep themselves safe and resist pressure to become involved in crime. Since each lesson addresses at least one golden rule pupils are encouraged to explore attitudes and values related to personal choices and decisions.

- Think before you do!
- Make up your own mind!
- Trust your own feelings!
- You can say 'NO'!
- Ask for help if you need to!

Funding from Drug Action Teams enabled the steering group to fund an evaluation of GIR during the academic year 2001/2. The evaluation (Downey *et al*, 2002) attempted to capture the experiences of the key stakeholders. In order to answer the research questions, we made use of a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods. These included administering self-completion questionnaires to 1318 pupils aged between seven and eleven, conducting twenty focus groups with pupils aged between five and eleven and observation of twenty-nine GIR lessons.

In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-five teachers and thirteen GIROs. Fieldwork was concentrated within ten primary schools. Evaluating GIR was complex because GIR is not a prescriptive programme. The picture which emerged from the evaluation was one of diversity in terms of both the nature and extent of pupils' accumulative exposure to GIR. Personalities accounted for much of this diversity because individual officers had considerable discretion regarding which lessons to deliver and whether to develop new ones in the spirit of GIR.

Key Findings

It was evident from our findings that almost all participants thought GIR was valuable and should be



retained in some form. It would seem implicit in this agreement that the intended benefits of GIR were being achieved and therefore that the programme was beneficial to the pupils' development.

However, our research findings do not provide substantive evidence of this. Only a more sophisticated and long-term evaluation could attempt to answer the question: does GIR reduce crime? To make sense of enthusiasm for GIR given insufficient evidence of its success, we explored stakeholders' accounts in-depth. This revealed that the unintended benefits of the programme were often considered as important, if not more so, than the intended benefits. Headteachers, teachers and GIROs greatly valued what they saw as improvements in community relations and the relationships between the police, school and communities. The GIROs' presence in schools was seen as breaking down barriers between police and community and this was considered of prime importance.

"The most basic aim is to get policemen accepted by people. We've had a whole layer of society growing up who hated policemen, and they've got no respect and they wouldn't come to us if they needed help." (GIRO)

"[They aim] to familiarise the children with the police and the police service and to introduce the police as friendly figures rather than just authoritarian figures." (Teacher)

Pupils' perceptions of police officers are only partly shaped by their interaction with GIR officers but it is important to note that the pupils' perceptions of the police were overwhelming

positive. Pupils were asked to select from a word bank (Wilby, forthcoming) of eight words and over 90% of the sample used positive words such as hard working, brave, kind, friendly and tough to describe police officers rather than negative ones such as bully, weak and lazy. Female pupils were more likely than male pupils to describe police officers outside school positively (99% compared to 93%) and pupils attending schools in more affluent areas (using free school meals as a proxy measure of socio-economic status) were also more likely to view police officers in a positive light (95% compared to 88%).

Concluding comments

The police investment in GIR is substantial and in an era of 'best value' and limited police resources can only be justified if it can be argued that the police enhance work already undertaken in primary schools to reduce crime. Justification also involves overcoming the scepticism felt throughout the police force hierarchy about whether the police should be involved in education. Previous research on the role of the police in drug education has often reached the view that police input should be concentrated on issues where police officers can speak with authority and that police officers should support teacher-led programmes (Newburn, and Elliott 1998; O'Connor *et al.*, 1999).

GIR deviates from this model of good practice because police officers were delivering some lessons unrelated to their police role and GIR was police rather than education-led. For these reasons we concluded that the project steering group should consider three key questions:

- Are the police the most appropriate professionals to teach all areas covered in GIR?
- Should teachers or other professionals be more involved, and if so what should the specific role and remit of the police be?
- If police input is not continued, how can the unintended benefit of improved community relations be maintained?

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References

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