



# YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE EDGE

## Listening to Young Offenders

We work at a day centre for heavily convicted 16-20 year old young offenders in the inner London area. Typical offences include domestic burglary, robbery, affray, G.B.H., and aggravated burglary. The young people are required to attend four and a half days a week 10.00am to 4.00pm for 10 weeks.

We have run groups with the young people on a daily basis for about two and a half years now and have learned a lot about their views on crime and punishment. We have incorporated their ideas into the programme and the results have been positive. Their views are often not heard, yet they have a lot to teach the professionals and the politicians. We interviewed a selection of current clients but our comments are also based on what young people have told us when they have called into the centre after completing the programmes.

### HOW DO YOU DEFINE HELP?

'Something that keeps you off the street with regular contact and with workers that care.'

'It has to be practical and not just talking; for example, getting help with money, training or jobs.'

'Something that keeps you busy all the time and stops you thinking about criminal activity - like I.T.'

One young woman said 'Using everything you know to advise the person; contacting other people, but most of all trying.'

These comments are typical, we hear them all the time. The issue of being practical is a big one for the young people. They want to see results and to be motivated, they need to feel something can be achieved. Like all young people they have hopes and ambitions. When they imply that they do not care about the future it's not true - they can be motivated when they believe they have a chance. Our feeling with this age group in particular is that Probation Officers really need to link with community resources. The craft instructors, educators and sessional workers all play an essential part in our day centre and the young people need this variety. They confirm this in their feedback to us - those workers regularly score highly. The new C.J.A.'s focus on partnership in this respect is a welcome recognition of the way forward.



Sherborne House

The Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, on a recent visit to Sherborne House

### WHAT HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT IN YOUR PAST AND AFFECTED YOUR VIEWS NOW?

Key events are often abusive family relationships or experience in care. Custodial sentences at a young age are massively significant.

'I was sent down when I was 14 and it hardened me - I didn't care anymore. My mum thinks I have changed. I have to put on a front all the time.'

'Jail is a stupid place to go. If you are soft it fucks you up, if you are rough it makes you rougher and you go out and do more crime. Prison makes you change when you do not want to - it's the only way to survive.'

'My parents separation affected me. My mum's new boyfriend beat her up and I couldn't bear it.'

'Going into care really affected me. I was 14 and I had just committed my first offence - the next year I committed nine. They kept moving me to places where there were only white people. I had it hard.'

'I went into care at 10 and had to fend for myself. I learnt to mix with all different people and I grew up too quickly.'

Many young people say they grew up too quickly and had to deal with very traumatic events which shortened their childhood. This nearly always resulted in disruptive behaviour and a failure to get through the school system. They learned 'bad ways'. They moved outside conventional society and could not move back. It made them tough and they started to take risks which rendered them liable to custodial sentences which compounded their difficulties. Many see their environments as playing a big role in their offending. One young man said 'If I'd lived in a different area I would have been O.K. Everybody on my estate did

crime. You had to do it.'

### WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU STOP?

'Lots of money. Something to do. I have stopped - it's how to stay stopped.'

'Moving to a new area where nobody knows me.'

'A job. My own business'.

'I don't think I'll ever stop if I can't drive legally. If I could drive legally I would stop.'

Their aspirations are not dramatically different to other young people of their age. Many are keen to get a trade or just to learn. What is crucially important is the way we represent 'education' and 'careers'. This relies on a dynamic worker who allows them to pursue whatever they want to - travel, activities, literacy, black history, business or applying for grants. This is education. They know that they have missed out and do not need to be patronised - they need to learn in a different way.

Young people come to the Probation Service when their lives are in crisis and they have a court appearance looming. Our experience is that they are looking for a different way and do not want to offend. We are sometimes overwhelmed by their chaos and do not listen to what they say. When we do listen we are guided to help appropriately. If our agenda overrides theirs we lose them - they vote with their feet. The relationship needs to be active, dynamic, creative and constructive. Sentencers and policy makers also need to hear this. We all have something in common with young offenders - we all want to reduce offending.

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