

editorial

young people in trouble?

Young people, it appears, are trouble. Individuals from a variety of backgrounds, perspectives and occupations will tell us so. Michael Howard certainly thought so, during his short term at the Home Office, as will the new arrival as Home Secretary, Jack Straw. So, too, we are told, do large sections of the British public, the police, and the courts. Some argue that the situation today is much worse than it was in the past. Others will never tire of outlining and highlighting a myriad of factors which, they suggest, are causally related to the troublesomeness of these youths, including poor parenting, single parenthood, inadequate education, relative and absolute deprivation, a lack of deterrents and lax punishment.

And many, in outlining what they consider to be the best ways of responding to and dealing with these young people, offer a vast array of punitive and in some cases draconian measures to keep young people in their place. Such measures include zero-tolerance campaigns, American style boot camps, curfew orders, parental responsibility and control orders, fast track punishments and electronic tagging. And, just in case we forget how troublesome young people generally are, the media will usually remind us.

Yet it is not so simple. In a year in which getting tough on the causes of crime helped elect New Labour, the Audit Commission lambasted youth justice as expensive, ineffective, and inefficient, and recommended a complete overhaul of an outdated and often uncaring system (Audit Commission 1996). More recently, the High Court indicated that Michael Howard dealt unlawfully with the two young people found guilty of the murder of James Bulger.

Certainly young people *are* in trouble but, as **John Muncie** succinctly argues in the opening article of this issue of CJM, there 'is far more trouble created for young people through political posturing, ill-conceived legislation and a general climate of vindictive authoritarianism than whatever is entailed in the trouble created by young people themselves'. The trouble that faces young people comes in large part from a society and a set of social arrangements which appear to be geared more towards their regulation and control than they are towards their development and maturation.

Whilst not losing sight of the very real harm caused

by the actions of some young people, as Blake Morrison (1997) describes so powerfully in his recent book about the complexities of the Bulger case, we should not ignore the value of their contributions. **Frances Lawrence's** conversation with **Mary Eaton**, in this issue, makes this point memorably. Thus, while we are only too well aware of recent Home Office research which suggests that the truth of the old adage about 'growing out of crime' may be less reliable in today's economic climate (Graham and Bowling 1995) we are also aware that further punitive discourse and/or draconian punishments are unlikely to provide the solution. Rather, such research highlights a pressing need for all those seriously involved with young people to get to grips with the complexities surrounding the increasingly problematic set of transitions from adolescence to full citizenship.

Clearly the future of any society depends on how far its members are prepared to invest in the social development of all its young people in the present. This can only be done if we improve our understanding of the realities of young people's lives. The announcement of a number of major research initiatives with a primary focus on youth should aid this process. (See Tim Newburn's Research Notes, at the back of the issue for further details).

This is the context for the current issue of CJM. We have attempted to steer clear of the more negative representations of young people which are readily available elsewhere. Rather, most of our contributors begin from the premise that young people are a valuable resource and deserve respect and recognition. Thus, although there remains a considerable emphasis on crime and justice issues - with articles on persistent offenders, drug use, prostitution, the prison system, policing and probation - we have also attempted to broaden the discussion to include youth culture (and counter-culture) and the changing social context of what is still sometimes referred to as 'the youth question'. In doing so we hope to bring some balance to the discussion of 'young people in trouble' by looking at least as much at the troubles facing young people growing up, as at the more usual issue of the trouble they are thought to create.

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References

- Audit Commission (1996) *Misspent Youth* (London HMSO)
- Graham, J and Bowling, B (1995) *Young People and Crime*. Home Office Research Study No. 154 (London HMSO)
- Morrison, B (1997) *As If* (Granta)