

In 1984 I tried to reflect the populist mood of the time by entitling a book on youth crime and youth justice 'The Trouble with Kids Today'. The title, of course, was intentionally ironic. As the book unfolds it is clear that 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. Thirteen years later I find no reason to revise that view. But the time has perhaps come to stop talking about young people in terms of 'trouble' or as a 'problem' and focus instead on young people

established whereby current concerns over crime are shifted out of a youth discourse and redirected to the more pressing issues of the global consequences of corporate crime, the devastating implications of racial and sexual violence, the acceleration of social inequalities and the regular abrogation of human rights by nation states. If we must persist in 'talking up' crime, then let it be in these areas, rather than within the pernicious, short sighted and self perpetuating debates about the 'youth problem'.

Desperate measures

Let's take stock. American-inspired boot camps, curfews on children under 10, the naming of young offenders in court, the shaming and public humiliation of offenders, parental responsibility orders, the power to impose electronically monitored curfews on 10 to 15 year olds, parental control orders, new disciplinary regimes at young offender institutions, the use of military prisons, fast-track punishment for 'persistent' offenders, the adoption of 'zero tolerance' campaigns to prosecute even the most petty and minor of offences, the electronic tagging of parents whose children are considered 'offensive' (sic), secure training centres for 12-15 year olds, tough minimum custodial sentences, tough community sentences, the extension of community service orders to 10 year olds, the expansion of CCTV surveillance, the removal of the legal presumption of *dolus incapax* for 10-13 year olds, the abolition of repeat cautioning (one strike and you're out?), more police, more prisons ... all of these measures were either in legislation, or in practice on an 'experimental' basis, or proposed by one or other of the two main political parties in the run up to the 1997 General Election.

How are we to make sense of this bewildering array of *additions* to a system of youth justice in England and Wales that is already replete with sentencing 'packages' and provided with more sentencing options than any other country in Europe? Surely we must be witnessing a massive youth crime-wave? Or is it more simply that political parties, desperate for your vote, turn to increasingly desperate measures? Why direct all this punitive venom towards

young people? Are they a new source of trouble? Or are they just an easy target, being powerless themselves to determine the political future of the country?

It is common knowledge that the peak age of *recorded* offending is 18 for young men and 14 for young women. We also know that a half of all young men and a third of young women between 14 and 25 admit to having committed a crime. What is less well publicised is that the *recorded* youth crime rate *declined* by 34 per cent between 1984 and 1994. How much time is also devoted to informing the public that the vast majority of these crimes are property offences (petty theft, shoplifting, car theft, non-residential burglary)? Serious violent crimes are exceedingly rare. To point this out is not to deny that certain communities suffer disproportionately to others and that, for some, life is becoming more and more unbearable. But it should make us question exactly what are all these measures for? Whose 'needs' are being targeted? Who is likely to benefit?

Learning lessons

As I write this, eighteen years of Conservative administration have just come to an end. Doubtless for many this will be a cause for rejoicing in the hope that years of authoritarianism might finally be over. Sadly the Labour Party's insistence that it will be 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' (with - yet another - new *Crime and Disorder Bill* to be given legislative priority) is unlikely to herald such a bright future.

But political rhetoric and the practice of youth justice are rarely congruent. The Conservatives may have experimented with the 'short, sharp, shock', may have loudly acclaimed their commitment to punishment whether in custodial or community settings, but from the mid 1980s they also presided over the most dramatic reduction in the use of youth custody this century. In 1983 13,500 young men under 18 were sentenced to immediate custody, by 1993 this had fallen to 3,300. The precise reasons for this dramatic and largely unexpected development remain in debate. Partly it was a result of a reduction in the number of 14-18 year olds in the population at large, partly the introduction of stricter criteria before magistrates could consider custody, partly the toughening up of conditions attached to

Investing in our future

John Muncie argues for a positive revisioning of the 'youth problem'.

as a valuable resource. Quite clearly the future of any society depends on how far we are prepared to invest in the social development of all young people in the present. As I have argued elsewhere, if we are seriously interested in formulating policies which are likely to impact on anti-social behaviour we need to move beyond an exclusionary discourse of crime, law and order and towards an inclusionary discourse of social justice and the enhancement of personal and social development. As a very first step an agenda needs to be



David Kidd-Hewitt

"Unless there is a realignment of political priorities in which it is no longer 'youth crime' that matters, but securing the space and time for youth opportunity and development, then we will continue to create future generations of 'trouble'."

supervision in order to win magisterial support, partly the 80 per cent reconviction rates for those sent to custody and partly because of Home Office advice to the police to use informal warnings rather than formally caution or prosecute. It was also undoubtedly driven by alarm at the increasing cost of custody.

Of course, events in the early 1990s, and particularly the murder of James Bulger, were used as a political catalyst to reverse much of this diversionary and decarcerative endeavour. And the number of young people sentenced to custody inevitably began to rise. As the list of desperate measures testifies, talk of 'custody-free zones' has once more become politically unacceptable. But then in late 1996 a new boost was given to some penal reformers from the unlikely source of the Audit Commission. Noting that around £1 billion is spent each year on processing young offenders, it argued that much of this was wasted on ineffective court procedures and disposals. It recommended the diversion of offenders away from prosecution and a reassertion of preventive strategies to 'guide young people towards constructive activities'.

Ironically, it is the grounds of 'value for money' that may be the most influential in stemming the current punitive obsession. As the Audit Commission noted, custody, intensive supervision and electronic monitoring are not cheap options. It is more financially expedient to deal with offenders by caution-plus or reparation schemes. In these managerial - obsessed days, youth justice is likely to be increasingly driven by economy, effectiveness and efficiency, rather than by the pursuance of wider goals such as meeting individual needs or protecting rights. All the main political parties have embraced the logic of the audit. The question remains how far the new Labour Party is prepared to abandon 'penal populism' in favour of more pragmatic and effective agendas.

Future danger

The removal of a Home Secretary convinced that 'prison works',

coupled with new managerial and financial agendas, should ensure that the current reversion to youth (but probably not adult) custody is halted. Boot camps, tagging and secure training centres may well be phased out (they have never had much support from the Prison Service, probation or local authorities). But the rhetoric of 'zero tolerance' remains. If pursued to the full, through closer surveillance and an over zealous identification of all those who might potentially be considered to be 'at risk', many more children and young people will be drawn into the net of youth justice. Unless the sentencing climate is changed many of these will inexorably be faced with custody as they 'career' through the sentencing tariff. Unless there is a realignment of political priorities in which it is no longer 'youth crime' that matters, but securing the space and time for youth opportunity and development, then we will continue to create future generations of 'trouble'.

In 1990 the case against custody was officially endorsed as an 'expensive way of making bad people worse'. Now is the time to (re) develop the case against youth criminalisation. Young people count for much more than as additions to the next set of Home Office criminal and prison statistics.

John Muncie is Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy at The Open University. He is currently writing a textbook on youth and crime to be published by Sage in 1998.

References

- Audit Commission (1996) *Misspent Youth*, London, Audit Commission.
Home Office (1990) *Crime, Justice and Protecting the Public*, Cm 965, London, HMSO.
Home Office (1997) *Preventing Children Offending*, Cm 3566, London, HMSO.
Muncie, J. et al. (1995) 'The Politics of Youth Crime Prevention' in Noaks, L. et al. (eds.) *Contemporary Issues in Criminology*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press.

Over the last two decades the lives of young people in Britain have changed quite radically. These changes affect their experiences in education and the labour market, their relationships and their lifestyles: they also have important implications for their involvement in criminal activities. The changing worlds of youth, which

Rites of passage

Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel examine the changing worlds of youth.

are rooted in the economic restructuring which occurred after the economic recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, have been described in detail in our new book *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity* (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). On a theoretical level, these changes have sometimes been described as heralding the start of a new epoch, or as representing the emergence of a new phase of late modernity. Due to the maintenance of strong underlying structures of inequality and the essential predictability of social life, we have been sceptical of attempts to represent these changes as indicative of a postmodern society. Nevertheless, in our view the changes are far-reaching enough to warrant a reconceptualisation of youth as a phase in the lifecycle as they have significant implications for the ways in which young people engage in social life.

Changing destinations

Over the last two decades, the labour market for 16 to 18 year-olds has effectively disappeared. Whereas young people once made mass transitions from school to the labour market at the age of 16, today they face the 'choice' between remaining in full-time education or joining training schemes which, in some areas, are associated with high rates of post-training unemployment. With a



sharp decline in employment in manufacturing industry and an increase in jobs within the service sector, the demand for relatively unskilled youth labour in large manufacturing units decreased rapidly. This shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist industrial structure led to a significant change in the types of opportunities available to young people. Employers increasingly demanded qualifications and placed an emphasis on the 'flexible specialisation' of labour. As a consequence, young people's transitions from school to work became much more complex and tended to take longer to complete: few now make direct transitions to work and many spend time out of work or on various training schemes.

Linked to changes in the labour market, more young people have started to follow routes which involved post-compulsory education. To put changes in patterns of educational participation into perspective, in the early 1970s around three in ten males and four in ten females participated in some form of post-compulsory education: by the early 1990s more than seven in ten young people were being educated beyond the age of 16 (70 per cent

of males and 76 per cent of females). This increase in educational participation is also evident in Higher Education which in the span of twenty years has been transformed from an elite to a mass experience with suggestions that more than six in ten of today's 18 year-olds will experience Higher Education at some time in their lives.

Despite the growing centrality of education in the lives of young people, it is important to acknowledge the maintainance of class-based inequalities: those from the professional social classes are almost twice as likely as those from manual classes to experience at least a year of post-compulsory education and are nearly three times more likely to enter Higher Education. Yet importantly, young people's experiences have become less differentiated by class: routes which involve further and higher education have become more widespread among all social classes and even those who have completed a university education frequently have to contend with periods of unemployment.

Extended dependence

While the protraction of school to

work transitions have tended to increase the period in which young people remain dependent on their families, a number of pieces of legislation were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s which reinforced this dependency by progressively removing entitlements to state benefits. Whereas in the 1970s young people could claim benefits upon leaving school at 16, today full adult entitlements are not available until the age of 25. To attain adult status, young people are required to complete a series of linked transitions: these include the school to work transition as well a domestic and housing transition. These transitions are inter-related in so far as experiences in one context will have an impact on other life events: a prolonged school to work transition tends to be associated with delayed housing and domestic transitions. As a consequence of these changes, typical sequences of transitions have changed and there are now few opportunities to establish an economically independent existence within the teenage years. Indeed, Donoghue (1992) has shown that each year around 80,000 16 and 17 year-olds leave full-time education without any source of income.

Changing patterns of criminal activity among the young can also be seen as an inevitable consequence of the extension of youth. Those without work or domestic responsibilities tend to have a relatively high level of involvement in crime and in this context it has been argued that extended dependency and the extension of youth as a life phase

has resulted in prolonged involvement in crime. As Graham and Bowling (1995) recently argued, 'if it is true that young people grow out of crime, then many will fail to do so, at least by their mid-twenties, simply because they have not been able to grow up, let alone grow out of crime' (1995: 56).

While the media are prone to exaggerate increases in criminality among the younger generation, there is some evidence to support the claim that delays in making key transitions can lead to a prolonged involvement in crime and there is evidence that commitment to a job or to another person are associated with a reduction in offending. Indeed, young people tend to become less involved in criminal activities as they find ways of gaining fulfilment in other areas of their lives and take on responsibilities in a work or domestic sphere. Being denied access to the financial rewards of working life and forced into greater dependency on their parents, young people may become involved in crime as a way to gain access to consumer cultures or simply as part of a quest for excitement.

Models of youth developed in the 1960s and 1970s tended to be based on the assumption that young people could make fairly rapid transitions from school to work and from dependence to independence. By contrast, the 1990s have been characterised by a protraction and desequencing of youth transitions. In our view these recent changes in the experiences of young people have important implications for many different aspects of their lives and are central to understanding trends in offending.

Andy Furlong is Reader and **Fred Cartmel** Research Associate in the Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow.

References

- Donoghue, B. (1992) *The Time of Your Life? The Truth About Being Young in 90s Britain*. British Youth Council: London.
- Furlong, A and Cartmel, F. (1997) *Young People and Social Change: Individualism and risk in the Age of High Modernity*. Open University Press: Buckingham.
- Graham, J. and Bowling, B. (1995) *Young People and Crime*. Home Office Research Study 145. London: Home Office.

"Being denied access to the financial rewards of working life and forced into greater dependency on their parents, young people may become involved in crime as a way to gain access to consumer cultures or simply as part of a quest for excitement."