

New Labour. New Government. New approaches to juvenile crime?

Apart from the economy, education, the health service, the welfare state and Europe one issue that's guaranteed to be on the agenda is crime. Recent European research which highlights Britain as the most crime-ridden society in the Western world could not have been better timed to dramatise the scale of the problem facing the new government.¹ Responses to young people in trouble are therefore likely to remain a priority. Measures designed to 'fast track' the criminal justice system and tackle juvenile

The new administration may find it difficult to resist perpetuating the myth that 'new answers to juvenile crime' are awaiting discovery over the horizon.

Political reality calls for 'sound bite solutions' to feed the media's voracious appetite for instant answers. It is particularly important therefore to persist with considered strategies which build on the many successful community approaches to juvenile crime which already exist.

Measures directed at parents, families, schools and the role of police, courts, probation service and local authorities will all have their champions.

Community support for young people

John Blackmore argues for a more coherent approach to youth crime prevention.

crime have already been announced. Being tough on crime, however, is likely to prove less problematic than being tough on the causes of crime.

A tough road ahead

The truth of the matter is of course that there are no easy answers. Just as the causes of crime and delinquency are multiple and complex so are the 'solutions'. What 'works' with one persistent offender may be completely unsuitable for another. A successful preventive project with juveniles in one local community may be significantly dependent on local circumstances and the personalities of key players and may be difficult to duplicate elsewhere.

However, one approach worth pursuing which is capable of widespread replication involves local authorities and partner agencies making a strategic commitment to the concept of building up networks of community support for young people in trouble. This approach calls for targeted work to be undertaken to engage young people in trouble in the range of mainstream or specialist resources that already exist which, with a bit of fine tuning, may be very appropriate to their needs. The emphasis of this approach would be placed on making more effective use of those education, welfare, leisure, sport, training, employment, health, community and regeneration services which are currently available. This strategy would focus on building up individual programmes of support for young people in trouble through utilising a community network approach. Each local community support network would draw on the existing resources of statutory and

voluntary agencies to form a flexible framework of provision which could be added to as resources and local circumstances permit.

Strategies for success

Local responses to local crime problems provide one way forward. The promising success of Intermediate

Treatment programmes in the 1980's showed that community responses to young people in trouble could be cost effective as well as successful in reducing crime. Successful projects² however may frequently operate in a strategic vacuum which limits their impact. It is not sufficient to have a single high profile project which works successfully with a limited number of juvenile offenders. Such projects need to form part of a coordinated youth justice and youth crime prevention programme, actively led by local authorities in partnership with the police, probation service, courts, health authority, voluntary sector and the community. If the private sector can be encouraged to demonstrate some sustained commitment then all the better.

Resourcing the action

Strategies are easier to agree than to resource. Resources, even under New Labour, even with such a high profile concern as juvenile crime, are likely to remain scarce. Whilst there is always a need for more resources a key challenge for local youth crime prevention partnerships is to ensure that existing resources are used most effectively to target and include young people in trouble.

There is evidence that this is not currently the case. In most local authority areas existing resources are not being utilised cost effectively because in reality they are not engaging many of the young people in trouble who might benefit from the services provided.

Whilst not all young people in trouble will respond to community approaches, the task of local agencies should be to promote strategies which open up existing specialised and mainstream services to young people in trouble. As a minimum, young people in trouble should be given positive opportunities to spend

Dalston Youth Project



more of their time drifting out of, rather than into, crime.

Accessing services

The basic premise for consideration is that in every local authority area there is on the one hand an identified group of young people in trouble already known to statutory agencies. These will include children and young people 'at risk'; children 'cautioned' by the police; young people dealt with through the courts, excluded from the education system, or 'accommodated' by the local authority or 'care leavers'. (These young people and families may be regarded as the tip of the 'in trouble' iceberg). On the other hand there is a range of existing mainstream and specialised services³ to which these young people in trouble do not gain sufficient access. The effective exclusion of many young people 'in trouble' from mainstream services means that existing scarce resources are not being fully utilised. It also means that young people in trouble are less likely to build up 'networks of community support' which could prevent their difficulties from escalating and which could continue indefinitely once their involvement with welfare and/or criminal justice agencies has ceased. The question to resolve is to what extent each local authority and the different agencies involved recognise the problems of engaging young people in trouble in these available support mechanisms and then do something strategically to open up the resources and thereby build up community networks of support.

Falling through the net

In many cases the different statutory agencies responsible for young people 'in trouble' (police, probation service, local authorities, health services) do not have coordinated or accurate information about who all these young people are or how many of them are the shared responsibility of the different agencies, let alone the extent to which they access programmes.

Even within agencies there is often inaccessible or inaccurate information about the different young people they are responsible for and whether or not they are

receiving appropriate support.

As a result children and young people in trouble frequently 'fall through the net' of specialist and mainstream services provided by different agencies who are funded to provide resources for such young people. They may also be missing out significantly from the range of voluntary and community projects that exist in their local communities. This problem has been highlighted in a number of reports.⁴

Why is this happening?

There may be a number of explanations why young people in trouble do not gain access to, or fully utilise, existing services:

- Young people may not be aware of the facilities that exist.
- Agencies' staff may not be aware of available local facilities to which young people could be referred.
- Agencies' staff do not refer young people because of 'professional' reasons or because to make a referral would involve time consuming work.
- The young people may not be very motivated and may require considerable support to encourage their participation in existing facilities. Agencies may not allocate time for their staff to provide a supportive relationship which is often crucial to engaging young people in community network facilities.
- The facilities that exist are not geared up to the needs of young people in trouble.
- The facilities may rely on young people coming to them, rather than them going to young people. Existing facilities may not believe they should make special efforts to engage young people 'in trouble'.
- Mainstream facilities are often too expensive for young people to use.
- Agency managers and staff may not be aware of or may not prioritise the concept of community support networks for young people in trouble.

Whatever the combination of reasons, the result is that both

specialist and mainstream youth facilities and projects exist which are not being fully utilised by children and young people in trouble.

Using what we've got

At a time of restricted and declining resources this issue is a cause for concern. Rather than placing undue emphasis on new solutions to young people in trouble which require significant additional resources, an approach which focuses on making better use of existing resources by ensuring that young people in trouble gain access to them through building up networks of community support is worth examining first.

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1 Criminal victimisation in eleven Industrialised Countries, Key Findings from the 1996

International Crime Victimization Survey prepared for the EU Conference May 14 1997 Netherlands.

2 For a recent summary of a range of positive projects see the ISTD Handbook of Community Programmes for Juveniles and Young Offenders. (0171 873 2822).

3 'Specialised' resources include those resources which have been established to target help at children and young people in trouble e.g. various youth crime prevention projects. 'Mainstream' resources include activities provided for a range of children and young people by youth, sports, leisure, health, regeneration, education, training, and employment providers.

4 See for example Joseph Rowntree Foundation national study 'Multi Agency work with Young People in Difficulty', (June 1995) and the more recent Audit Commission Report Misspent Youth (1996) Audit Commission Report; Cambridge Research (SEARCH 1995) - to source

The ISTD Handbook

"It is not only parents who don't know what to do with persistent juvenile offenders; the vast majority of 'criminal justice professionals', including the courts, are also unclear about what courses and treatment programmes exist and how they operate.

So the publication of the first ever handbook of non-prison community-based programmes for young and juvenile offenders marks another step away from the deep gloom of the 1970s 'nothing works' approach to crime.

The 160 entries in the handbook embrace such enterprises as the Liverpool Arson Project, the Lennox Lewis College, and the Burglary Offenders Programme. It has been put together by Carol Martin, of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency. The projects covered include those targeted at drug and alcohol misuse, violence, burglary, autocrime to sex offending, as well as education and training opportunities and access to outdoor activities."

Alan Travis, Guardian Society - 12th February 1997.

The ISTD Handbook of Community Programmes for Young and Juvenile Offenders by Carol Martin, is available from ISTD, King's College, Strand, London WC2R 2LS. (£13.50 including p&p) Tel: 0171 873 2822. Fax: 0171 873 2823. E-mail: istd.enq@kcl.ac.uk

