

Persistent Youth Offending: Community - The Missing Link

Patricia Booth and Peter Eccles identify the community as the missing link in interventions aimed at tackling persistent youth offending.

The new youth justice system is being directed by the Youth Justice Board to focus attention on persistent young offenders, recently redefined as 'active repeat offenders'. This group of young people have been the subject of research. In the 1990s, Hagell and Newburn (1994) and Graham and Bowling (1995) clearly identified young people at risk. It is this research and associated knowledge which continues to influence how youth offending services respond to the three per cent of youthful offenders who commit 25 per cent of detected youth crime (approximate figures). The practitioner is directed to models of intervention aimed at addressing risk factors and presenting problems such as cognitive behaviour and substance abuse.

Inclusion and empowerment

Intervention based solely on knowledge gained from research denies what we know about developing commitment to, and ownership of, a given course of action, about inclusion and the changes which can be brought about in young people having the opportunity to contribute to their own future. Not engaging with the concept of inclusion and empowerment is a failure to see the

whole picture and a denial of the notion of community. If individuals and neighbourhoods are to be seen as accountable for their young peoples' offending they must be included in the solution.

This current model of practice raises important issues:

- It is based on a 'deficits' model, a remedial approach aimed at resolving perceived deficits in individual or family pathology
- The Government's objective is to target the underlying causes of a young person's offending which spring from their home and neighbourhood. These causal factors are not, at present, routinely a direct focus in the intervention programme for each young person.
- Intervention focuses on the individual and is largely undertaken in isolation from their family/carers or neighbourhood.
- The strengths within the young person's whole situation are not routinely engaged to contribute to the intervention process
- Sustainability is not a built-in prerequisite to intervention planning.
- The period of intervention is not based on the level of progress or need, but on the length of a Court Order.

Any model of intervention if it is to truly make a difference in reducing persistent offending must address the above issues. To do this will not be easy for policy makers, for managers or for practitioners. It will require vision, courage, belief and leadership to shape policy, secure resources and develop practice. Such thoughts might seem off the wall or impractical but before rejecting them consider what we already know.

What does not work

The youth justice system has spectacularly failed to deliver a

reduction in persistent offending among young people. Despite the quite staggering sums of money spent to deal with youth crime little has changed in the last 25 years.

Research and experience tell us that:

- Prison does not prevent offending.
- So-called 'community alternatives' have little impact on offending rates.
- Many young people involved in the criminal justice system feel alienated from mainstream society.
- Much current crime is drug related and young people involved with drugs are less susceptible to societal pressures.
- People living in high crime areas feel powerless and see youth crime as inevitable.
- Young people who offend are often seen as undeserving by those distributing resources.
- That what works to prevent adults from offending is unlikely to work with young people.
- That when young people have a stake in society, offending reduces. The reverse is also true.
- People who need help need it when they need it, not just when the office is open.

Despite understanding this we continue to provide more of the same, admittedly re-badged and re-evaluated but essentially still the same. Current models of practice will not deal with persistent youth offending any more effectively than they did in the past. If practice continues to be undertaken in isolation from the environmental influences which create offending, young people will continue to be unable to make sustainable positive change, as this will not be understood or supported by family, peers and community. If the community do not 'own' the



solution then there will be no ownership of the change programme. Youth Offending Teams need to 'think outside the box'. The paradigm needs to be shifted from punishment of the negative to development and support for the positive. In all but the most dysfunctional family situations there are positive attributes which can be encouraged and built upon as part of a sustainable programme of intervention.

Working outside the box

Because we do not 'start with the end in mind' (Covey 1994), we begin with the presenting problem, not the contributory causes. In order to gain a clear understanding of the circumstances which give rise to offending behaviour, practitioners must engage with the young person and their family/carers directly and in their own homes or neighbourhoods. A programme of change must start with the active involvement of all the people who have a contribution to make. Professional staff do not always have the experience to engage with young people and their networks in a way which is credible or realistic. There is often reluctance to recognise this or to

give up power and status to unqualified people from local communities. It is just such people, who are seen as credible and in tune with local culture, who can make a difference in bridging the gap between the professional role and the family and neighbourhood contribution. In order to effect substantial change, the way into which people in local communities view young people needs to be radically readjusted. Models of such an approach can be found in North America, in the work of organisations such as Youth Advocate Programs (YAP). However these programmes, whilst highly effective in reducing persistent and serious youth crime, cannot be transposed directly in to U.K. communities. A certain amount of hybridisation and cultural adjustment must be made if the methodology is to be effective. Attempting to involve a community in a meaningful way requires the community to identify itself. The community consultation process, which receives lip service in many a strategic plan, has a tendency to rely upon the most organised and vocal elements with specific agendas. Engaging the community is difficult as it involves changing perceptions at a

local level, and also requires statutory organisations to take risks and reconfigure resourcing. This is not a 'quick fix' and if YOTs are to be encouraged to work differently then the support of policy makers is crucial, as funding alone will not encourage practitioners and managers to change their practice. Early wins are fine in order to achieve initial credibility, but it will be vital to ensure that YOTs are fully supported by other Government Departmental Initiatives in a consistent and coordinated attempt to shift the paradigm. ■

Patricia Booth is a Youth Offending Team manager. Peter Eccles is a lecturer at the University of Huddersfield.

References:

- Hagell A. and Newburn T. (1994) *Persistent Young Offenders* London: Policy Studies Institute
- Graham J. and Bowling B. (1995) *Young People and Crime*, London: Home Office
- Covey S.R., Merrill A.R. and Merrill R.R. (1994) *First Things First*, New York: Simon and Schuster