

# Research into youth justice and the effective practice agenda

Maggie Blyth looks at how the 'effective practice agenda' draws on research to improve youth justice services.

Since the publication of the Audit Commission's seminal report *Misspent Youth* in 1996, there has been a growing preoccupation within youth justice services towards an evidenced based approach in reducing offending amongst children and young people. This cannot be seen in isolation from the 'what works' literature of the adult correctional services and New Labour's modernisation agenda. The emphasis on audit and hard evidence in the design and delivery of public services has been at the heart of a central drive to improve youth justice services. The purpose of this article is not to rehearse the different interpretations of evidence-based practice within correctional services as readers can find detailed analysis elsewhere (see, in particular, Burnett and Roberts, 2004; Stephenson, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth considering the Youth Justice Board's approach, commonly known as 'effective practice', to gain insight into the political and cultural changes initiated by research findings.

in a dynamic framework of effective practice as opposed to a set of formulaic interventions which could be overly restrictive for practitioner use. The outcome is a set of principles that define effective practice research rather than a confused array of 'good' or 'best' practice examples. The availability of the guidance has been enhanced by a new national qualifications framework, of which the centrepiece is the Professional Certificate in Effective Practice (Youth Justice) delivered through universities. By October 2005 nearly 70 per cent of the Youth Justice eligible workforce had undertaken a course in effective practice.

Whilst some critics have been uneasy about the interventionist approach of the YJB, the direct dissemination of current research into youth justice practice has reinforced three important messages. Firstly, that practice should be evidence-based and subject to regular review. Secondly, a national benchmark has been set, against which local services

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## Context

Research into effective practice has been an integral part of the modernising role of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB). With a principal aim of preventing offending amongst children and young people enshrined in the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998*, the YJB has established the identification and promotion of effective practice as one of its main remits. It sets the following definition:

*"All practice must be derived from the latest and most reliable findings...effective practice in this context is not a synonym for evidence-based practice but rather those programmes, processes and ways of working that have the highest level of validation from research and evaluation"* (YJB, 2005).

The YJB has outlined the key principles of effective practice within youth justice services by publishing fifteen *Key Elements of Effective Practice*. These documents set out the core elements of new research findings about effective youth justice services and contain key quality indicators drawn from the evidence. The process has combined national oversight with local flexibility, resulting

can measure their performance. Thirdly, youth justice services have been transported into a new era of programme planning and delivery as a direct consequence of the effective practice movement. It is certainly clear that youth justice research is based on the best of scientific enquiry, critical experience in the field, alongside reasoning and evaluation from academic sources. The bank of knowledge about children and young people who offend has given youth justice services a significant boost – a deliberate attempt by policy makers working in youth justice to highlight the needs of children and young people who offend. In a political climate where an emphasis on providing universal services limits funding for targeted groups, this profile is pivotal to the work of Youth Offending Teams (Yots).

Furthermore, the involvement of practitioner and academic expertise in defining effective practice within youth justice has been a unique feature in enabling research to gain credibility and currency amongst front-line staff. In addition, unlike the adult prison and probation model of accredited programmes, youth justice interventions are focused

on multi-modal methods which cover all aspects of a young person's life. This takes account of the broad nature of work with children and young people and reflects the fact that Yots are immediately accountable to local communities, not central government. Practitioners have responded well to this though it has not always been an easy marriage – tensions have sometimes emerged between local management and national guidance. However, it has provided a central framework within which local managers can prioritise resources for young offenders and against which they can measure their performance.

## Reductions in offending

The principal aim of the reformed youth justice system is the prevention of offending. This is captured in the Home Office's *Public Service Agreement (PSA) 5*. Much of this target is preoccupied with reductions in recidivism rates. Nevertheless, in comparing the added value of the youth justice system over time, it is important to consider how effective practice increases our knowledge of the prevention of youth crime in its widest context. Experience has shown that to provide a fuller picture of effectiveness we should also focus on reducing the seriousness and frequency of youth offending. This has been an important political shift and will enable a greater understanding amongst government and the public into the volatility of young people's lives.

Youth justice research has brought rigour to the debate about the sort of interventions young people should receive to reduce their likelihood of reoffending – the concept of 'dosage' has gained currency as part of other 'what works' language. In particular, the implementation of *Asset*, a structured assessment tool, supported by careful risk management, has transformed Yot practice. *Asset* gives comprehensive coverage of key risk and protective factors and assists practitioners in the prediction of reconviction amongst the young people they supervise. Practitioners use their professional skills to contribute towards a scoring system which is designed to help them organise an appropriate intervention with the right level of intensity to address particular offending behaviour. Practitioners can engage with young people whilst drawing on their understanding of effective practice in recording and analysing information (Baker, 2005). This has helped expand research on the management of troubled young people in community settings.

## Multi-disciplinary working

Yots are now the delivery norm for youth justice services across England and Wales and have attracted interest from other public sector areas in the UK as well as international acclaim. They have been given the 'thumbs up' as operational models and have remained intact through recent reforms in both correctional and children's services. Indeed, some prison service establishments strive to replicate such partnerships and employ as many educational and health staff to support young people as traditional prison officers. Breaking down cultural barriers between staff from different professions has been a necessary development to support the findings of effective practice. Bringing in expertise from a vast pool of volunteers has also revolutionised the way that Yots deliver their services to young people with a much greater emphasis on local political accountability. Youth justice research has

been a strong driver in the development of civil renewal and community engagement.

## What next?

Despite the increased knowledge of effective practice in youth justice, the number of young people sentenced to custody remains worryingly high. Research into effective practice in the juvenile secure estate lags behind the community despite detailed work on improvements to education, health and the safeguarding of children. There is still much to do in successfully embedding the principles of effective practice into the work of Yots. The YJB is supporting this through its commitment to continuous improvement and the implementation of its innovative performance management framework which successfully links the use of key performance indicators, quality indicators and a learning and development strategy. There can be no mistake that the effective practice approach still has a long way to go in persuading sentencers that robust interventions in the community may be better for some young people.

Programmes based on effective practice should become the norm during the next decade. However, youth justice services must not fall into the trap of always looking towards the centre for knowledge about how to devise interventions for children and young people. The trick in sustaining the success of the Youth justice reforms must be for youth justice services to ensure they have the confidence and skills to use the principles of effective practice literature and then design programmes consistent with the evidence base at local level. In this way practitioners themselves contribute to the body of knowledge about what prevents offending and can influence the political landscape.

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