

Society is experiencing something of a moral panic over persistent young offenders. Many young people are seen to be heavily involved in criminal activities, outside of mainstream society, out of control and beyond redemption. The media regale us with sensationalised stories of wrong doing in young people. Headlines such as "boy rapist convicted" and "car thief aged eight seriously injured in collision..." help to fuel the perception many hold of a lost generation.

Profiling juveniles

David Mellish discusses the Northumbria Police definition of 'persistence'.

But what does the term persistent young offender actually mean? Is it the twelve year old who steals on ten separate occasions or the fifteen year old who commits three house burglaries in the space of one evening? Is it only the former, only the latter or both, indeed, does the label apply to either of them?

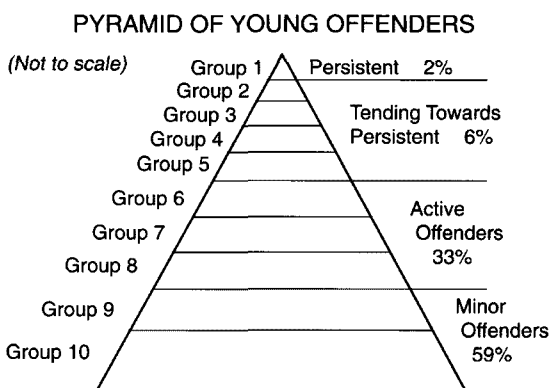
Northumbrian research

The lack of any meaningful yardstick acted as a prompt to Northumbria Police to undertake research in this field, commencing in 1995 with a trawl of cases which revealed thirty five young offenders who had been arrested six hundred and thirty nine times.

The first task the researchers undertook was to determine a definition of the term persistent.

A modular definition was developed from a study of four hundred case studies extracted from the Northumbria Police Computerised Information System. The Northumbria system is the most comprehensive available.

The definition contains eight modules measuring either the behaviour of the individual or the controls applied to the individual and is used to profile the offending



population of young people within the Northumbria area.

The definition was applied over a sample period of three months and a control period of the preceding nine months as follows:

Sample Period

- Module 1 Repeatedly arrested
- Module 2 Arrest leading to court appearance
- Module 3 Offence committed whilst on bail
- Module 4 Offence likely to cause harm
- Module 5 Already either;
 - (i) subject of a supervision order; or
 - (ii) subject of an attendance centre order; or
 - (iii) served a sentence at a young offender institution.

Control Period

- Module 6 Repeatedly arrested
- Module 7 Offence committed whilst on bail
- Module 8 Offence likely to cause harm

When applied to a full twelve months period during which over 9,000 young people were arrested the definition identified a total of 105 young people including 32 who were 14 years or younger. These young people were prolific in their offending patterns and had been in the criminal justice system for around four years, almost always commencing their offending patterns at 11 years or younger.

Research also showed that they were part of a large and loose network of other young people who they have committed offences with. For example, five case studies revealed levels of between 25 and 63 such associates. The persistent young offenders of the case studies had the most serious offending patterns of any of their

associates; many of the associates being recent entrants to the criminal justice system. This indicates that there may be a substantial risk that through returning the experienced persistent offender to the community other, vulnerable, young people may be drawn into criminality.

Lessons for practitioners

The development of this modular persistent young offender definition provided evidence of the numbers of such young offenders and the findings support the police position that there should be the provision of suitable secure accommodation to intervene with these offending patterns.

Whilst established as a tool to monitor persistency the modular definition can actually be applied to all offender case histories as a 'pyramid of young offenders' demonstrates (see figure). Thus an offender who qualifies for all eight of the modules is classed as Group 1, or persistent, a first time minor offender will not qualify for any of the modules and will be classed as Group 10, or minor.

The pyramid can be flattened by providing secure accommodation, but as far as the rest of the pyramid is concerned there will be several hundreds of young people at various stages of their offending patterns rising up towards the point of persistency. There must be many of these young people who could be diverted from their offending patterns if appropriate intervention strategies were in place. It is here in identifying diversionary strategies, that the major challenge to criminal justice practitioners lies.

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