

Executive Summary

Engaging with the views of young people with experience of the youth justice system

Deliberative research and engagement by the Police Foundation and NatCen, the National Centre for Social Research



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Authors: Nicky Cleghorn, Rachel Kinsella and Carol McNaughton Nicholls

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Background

The Police Foundation and NatCen (the National Centre for Social Research) were awarded grant support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Social Justice Programme for an engagement project with young people who have experience of the youth justice system as witnesses, victims or perpetrators of crime. The insights obtained through the project were used to contribute to proposals for reforming the way society responds to youth offending, developed by the Independent Commission on Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour ('the Commission').

The engagement process consisted of two stages of research, interviewing 21 young people and four deliberative focus groups, and a series of workshops that brought young people together with members of the Commission to discuss their views. The findings from the research and deliberative workshops are summarised here. These are based entirely on the views of the young people and reflect the concerns that they raised.

Understanding youth crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB)

- Young people become involved in crime or ASB for a variety of reasons. They have often experienced fractured and difficult home lives and live in communities with a high level of crime. When they engaged in crime or ASB it was often alongside a sense that they had few legitimate employment or education opportunities.
- Not all young people who offended had experienced such unsettled lives however, and for some, becoming involved in crime predated problems they experienced at home.
- Engaging in certain forms of crime was considered normal behaviour within their social networks, providing excitement or a way of filling in time; for some, it could provide income or status in the face of few other options.
- Young people reported feeling unfairly labelled by adults as engaging in crime or ASB, when they were simply acting as a 'normal' young person would, such as being on the street with friends. This could lead to them feeling alienated from adults.

Contact with the youth justice system

Whether as victims, witnesses or offenders, the young people preferred to avoid contact with the youth justice system (YJS) if they could. Recommendations made by the young people regarding improvement to the YJS included:

Police

- Young people have a higher level of trust in the police when they feel the police communicate with them like 'normal' people, with a degree of respect; listen to them; are polite, and explain what is happening.
- When the police treat young people in this manner they felt more likely to report crime and cooperate with police if they are arrested.
- 'Stop and searches' are not popular and the practice is felt to discriminate against young people.

Recommendations generated during the engagement workshop to improve relations between the police and young people included:

- Specialist training for police officers on working with young people (which could be developed, informed or delivered by young people).
- Ensuring diversity among police officers, which could include those who have previously been offenders.
- Respected members of the young people's social networks or community acting as intermediaries with the police.
- Police investing in and having a positive presence in communities, which is actively promoted and advertised. This would 'humanise' the police and generate a sense that they can and do support and help young people.

Courts

Attending court could be an inevitable aspect of the lives of young people involved in crime, but was considered an inconvenient rather than difficult process. However:

- Young people were also concerned about the process, and would like clear information about it when they attend court.

- The length of time that it takes for a case to come to court can limit the ability to 'move on' the young person have once they have been charged with an offence.
- Concerns regarding attending court at the same time as the offender can prevent young people who are victims or witnesses from attending. To alleviate this, it was suggested that victims or witnesses should be able to give their evidence by alternative means, on a different day or at another location.

Deliberation during the engagement workshop led to the following conclusions regarding the court process:

- Attending court is not necessarily a deterrent that would prevent young people from committing an offence and can become routine.
- The process of attending court is not well understood by young people or explained to them.
- There can be lengthy delays before a case goes to court. During this time young people can feel in 'limbo'.
- It is fair for young people to go to court for serious offences, but not if they are very young or the offence is minor.
- Young people favoured decisions being made in court by professionals and not a lay panel.
- Minor offences should be dealt with in an informal 'meeting' type situation, in which procedures are clearly explained to young people, rather than in court.

Custodial sentences

- Custodial sentences could act as a deterrent to crime, but could also act to embed young people into social networks and environments where crime is normalised.
- Custodial sentences are useful only when accompanied with support to access training, education or overcome problems such as a substance misuse.
- There needs to be better support for making the transition from prison to the community, especially in terms of securing stable accommodation, accessing training and employment and abstaining from substance misuse.

- Generally, custodial sentences were not viewed as useful for preventing further crime being committed in the future.

Priority areas of agreement between young people and Commissioners regarding custody included:

- There is a need for good quality resettlement support that is consistent and long term. This would support people once released and help them to avoid reoffending (an example of this type of support was provided).
- Custodial remands are lengthy and should be set at as short a period as possible.
- Alternatives to short custodial sentences should be provided that include support for underlying problems such as drug misuse.
- High quality support is possible in prison, as one pilot project discussed during the engagement demonstrated, and should become routine.

Restorative justice

- Restorative forms of justice were favoured by the young people throughout the research. This included offenders repairing property they had damaged, replaying victims whose property they had stolen and providing an opportunity to consider the impact their offending may have on others.

Workshop discussions on restorative justice highlighted, however, the following limitations to this approach:

- The nature of the offence should be taken into account and restorative justice may not be appropriate for serious offences.
- The set up and process is complex and can be lengthy.
- Engagement of all parties—victims, witnesses, community members etc—is required for restorative justice to be successful.

Rehabilitation

- It was suggested that young people, particularly those who are ex-offenders, could be employed to support other young offenders, because they understand what they are going through and the young person will listen and respect them.
- Young people felt that it was important that they should have respect for the YJS to ensure that it functioned well. The recommendations from the research indicate ways in which this may be achieved—this included the suggestion of a points system whereby young offenders can ‘earn’ a clean criminal record that also enhances their chances of rehabilitation.

Desistance from offending

Young people no longer involved in crime identified key factors that had triggered their desistance from offending. These included:

- A critical event in their life such as being badly injured in an assault, or knowing someone who had been badly injured.
- Being able to develop greater stability in their life, such as securing suitable accommodation and having something meaningful to occupy their time. Obtaining a reasonable income could be particularly problematic after becoming used to income derived from crime.
- Having a positive role model and support in their life. This could come from unofficial sources, or professionals such as YOT workers, providing they were very engaged and understanding.
- Young people developing their own self awareness, aspirations and goals for the future.
- Desistance was also associated with:
 - Living in a crime free environment and/or having a friendship group not involved in crime;
 - Independent thought and thinking about the consequences of crime;
 - Receiving guidance from parents/carers and school; and,
 - ‘Growing up’ and gaining employment or an occupation.

Workshop plenary on desistance. The following key issues were raised, regarding desistance, at the workshop sessions:

Desistance requires

- Early intervention;
- Responsible carers/parents.

And is promoted if young people have:

- Positive role models and mentors;
- Aspirations and goals; and,
- Job and education opportunities.

For these outcomes to be achieved in the lives of young people requires more than the restructuring of the YJS, however; it requires societal and structural change. This poses a challenge to the Commission. However the message from young people is clear—young people can be supported to cease their involvement in crime when the system operates in a manner that incorporates their needs.

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Rachel Kinsella
Nicky Cleghorn
Carol McNaughton Nicholls

www.natcen.ac.uk