
Prevention and Reduction: A review of strategies for intervening early to prevent or reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour

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Scope

We are not here concerned with programmes that target infants and very young children with the aim of improving outcomes on a whole range of dimensions: those have already been discussed in the Allen review. Instead, we are concerned with programmes and practices for which the primary aim is to have an impact on the development of antisocial and criminal behaviour in young people aged 8 and above.

Quality of evidence

Pivotal to any review of interventions aimed at changing young people's behaviour is the quality of the evidence used to assess whether these interventions do in fact work. The interventions and characteristics of interventions that are presented as working in this review are based on the most scientific and rigorous methods of evaluation. In order to be considered as working, these programmes have been shown to work in at least two evaluations which incorporate a well defined control group to test what would have happened if there had been no intervention, with a very similar group of individuals.

International evidence

In a broad ranging meta-analysis examining interventions for reducing youth reoffending, four key characteristics were associated with programme effectiveness:

- *The methods used to evaluate early intervention programmes.* Generally this is a forewarning against reliance on poorly designed evaluations which tend to overstate programme effectiveness.
- *The Intervention type and mode.* Interventions that embody 'therapeutic' philosophies aimed at nurturing a positive change in young people, and in particular those employing cognitive behavioural techniques, are the most effective overall. Those based on strategies of control or coercion – on surveillance, deterrence, and discipline – are far less effective and in some cases can actually make matters worse.

- *Quality of programme implementation.* This was so important that a less effective but well implemented programme could out-perform a more effective programme that was poorly implemented.
- *The characteristics of the juveniles being treated.* Interventions targeted at individuals already manifesting problematic behaviours or demonstrating many of the risk factors associated with the development of offending behaviour are more effective than universally applied programmes.

There is evidence that programmes which employ a multi-modal design where a broad range of interventions are applied attending to a multitude of different risk factors are more effective. However they only work where there is also a dedicated case worker present to oversee and coordinate programme delivery.

Most of the interventions that have been shown to be effective share most (if not all) of the characteristics identified above. Among programmes aimed at the individual, one type of programme stood out as effective:

- ***Child skills training*** which aims to teach children social, emotional, and cognitive competence by addressing appropriate effective problem solving, anger management and emotion language.

Best Practice: Child skills training is especially effective when applied to smaller (more manageable) class sizes, employs cognitive behavioural techniques of instruction and is targeted at older and high risk young people.

Within family focused prevention, the following programmes were found to be effective:

- ***Behavioural parent training (BPT)*** which teaches parents to be consistent in reinforcing helpful behaviour and punishing or ignoring hostile or unco-operative behaviour.

Best practice: BPT is more effective in smaller (more manageable) class sizes, and when aimed at parents of older young children (approximately aged 10 and above).

- ***Multisystemic therapy (MST)*** which is an intensive, individualised, home-based therapeutic intervention for high risk juveniles. Depending on the young person's needs MST could include child skills training, parenting training, measures aimed at reducing a young person's association with deviant peers, and measures for improving academic performance and attachment to school.

Best practice: There is evidence of increased effectiveness when there is strong adherence to the original programme design.

- ***Family Functional Therapy (FFT)*** is a clinic-based intervention that includes three therapeutic stages: first, an engagement and motivation phase in which reframing techniques are used to reduce maladaptive perceptions, beliefs and emotions within the family. This then creates the context for a second phase

employing behavioural change techniques. Finally there is a 'generalisations' phase in which families are taught to apply the learnt skills in various contexts (the school, the justice system, the community).

Best practice: Programme effects were only evident where there was strong adherence to the original design.

- **Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)**. Young people are placed in short-term foster homes where they receive individual therapy and behavioural coaching similar to child skills training. At the same time their parents (or guardians) receive weekly family therapy in which they are taught effective parenting and family management techniques.

Effective school based programmes tend to be those aimed at changing the school environment as opposed to interventions that focus on changing the individual alone. This includes:

- **The reorganisation of grades or classes** to group together high-risk or disruptive pupils for periods of the school day, while teaching them with alternative curriculum material and using cognitive behavioural techniques.
- **Classroom or instruction management interventions** emphasising interactive instructional methods using cognitive behavioural techniques.
- **School discipline and management strategies**, particularly those which draw on teams of staff and members of the local community to change the decision-making process or authority structures of the school in order to enhance its general capacity.

Within the community, both mentoring and after school recreation programmes were identified as promising.

- **Mentoring** typically involves a non-professional drawn from the community spending time with an at risk young person in a non-judgemental, supportive capacity whilst also acting as a role model.

Best practice: Mentoring is more effective when applied as part of a programme of interventions, where meetings are at least once a week and five or more hours in duration with an emphasis on emotional support, and where the mentor is motivated by professional advancement.

- **After school recreation** offers young people the opportunity to engage in and learn skills in a range of activities including non-academic ones.

Best practice: Only effective if the programme is highly structured and includes proper supervision.

Interventions that do not work or are less effective include:

- Interventions focused primarily on coercion or control, i.e. surveillance, deterrence or discipline
- Military-style boot camps
- Individual counselling (not based on cognitive behavioural techniques)
- Unstructured life skills training
- Community service activities
- Gun buyback programs
- Short-term non-residential training programs, summer jobs or subsidised work programmes
- Any programme that groups high risk students together in the absence of a structured programme is associated with increased levels of delinquency.

Tackling youth crime in England

The good news is that across the youth crime landscape in England, there is little evidence of the employment of interventions that are shown not to work (although this has happened in some cases). What is more, the majority of interventions in England use programmes that have been tried and tested, or are similar to programmes proven to be effective, or else they comprise many of the characteristics of interventions shown to be effective in the international literature. In some cases this amounts to the wholesale implementation of US-developed-and-evaluated programmes (MST, FFT and MTFC (including Intensive Fostering, a variation on MTFC with young offenders)). Moreover, as part of their implementation in the UK, steps are also being taken to ensure programme fidelity, including the monitoring of programme delivery to alleviate any fall in programme quality.

Without replicating US programmes, a number of other interventions have many of the characteristics of programmes demonstrated to be effective. For example:

- The persistent Young Offender Project (PYOP) in Portsmouth is a multi-modal programme targeted at high risk youths that incorporates child skills training, mentoring in conjunction with other services, cognitive behavioural therapy, and non-academic activities enabling young people the opportunity to express competencies in other areas
- Intensive Supervision and Support Programmes (ISSPs) designed for persistent young offenders and used as part of community-based rather than custody-based sentences, is a multi-modal approach that includes family group conferences, individual mentoring and skill building
- Youth Inclusion and Support Panels (YISPs) also employ a multi-modal design and target young people already engaging in youth offending. The programmes

include family group conferencing, parenting support and mentoring coordinated by a dedicated key worker

- Although there are few explicit school-based programmes primarily aimed at reducing youth crime and antisocial behaviour in England, the strategies that are employed represent a whole-school approach to tackling behaviour and discipline, aimed at affecting change to the school environment through authority structures and decision-making processes. Certain specific activities may also lead to positive gains in these areas. SEAL, for example, is a good example of an effective child skills training programme.

However, some well-intended programmes have the characteristics of interventions that are known to be ineffective.

- Youth Inclusion Panels (YIPs), for example, employ skills training that lack the social, emotional and cognitive focus of effective child skills training programmes. In addition the mentoring offered as part of this intervention reflects a simple role-model based approach as opposed to the intensive mentoring shown to be effective in the international literature
- Safer school partnerships involve the embedding of a police officer in schools giving the approach surveillance undertones, a factor that has also raised concerns regarding the stigmatising of particular schools
- After School Patrols are based solely on deterrence and involve situating police officers on problematic bus routes and interchanges. According to the international literature, they are unlikely to be effective in preventing or reducing young people's long term engagement in youth crime or antisocial behaviour.

Implementation and going to scale

A fair number of well-defined early intervention programmes have by now been shown to work, and others are currently being evaluated in England, but they are only reaching a tiny fraction of the population of young people who are at risk. The next problem is how to implement successful early intervention programmes on a much larger scale. Going to scale is extremely difficult, because programmes tend to be diluted once the original band of enthusiasts is no longer directly involved in implementing them. Not only are effective programmes needed, but also effective strategies for delivering them on a wider scale.

Probably the most developed plan for achieving this aim is offered by the Communities that Care (CTC) model. Local decision making bodies drawn from the community are given special training and choose the prevention programmes from a list of those that have demonstrated effects on risk or protective factors and problem behaviours in at least one study using a strong research design. The processes of monitoring, supervision and reporting are structured so as to facilitate a two-way flow of information

between those delivering the service, their supervisors, the coordinators belonging to Communities that Care, and a Social Development Research Group at a university. In short, this model gives ownership of prevention programmes to local coalitions, and by providing strong support, guidance, and monitoring aims to ensure that they choose effective interventions and implement them well.

Improving the quality of evaluations in England

By drawing on evidence from the international literature, primarily the US, we are able to provide a critical evaluation of youth crime interventions in England, where the scientific evidence is less robust. But relying solely on US evaluations is not good enough, since conditions and cultures are significantly different in Britain and the US. More should be done to improve the general quality of evaluations carried out in the UK. There are good examples where best practice has been applied to UK evaluations. The aim is to try and ensure that all future evaluations meet with these same high standards, so that:

- Care is taken to ensure that evaluations include a suitable comparison or control in order to enable proper assessment of whether observed changes were due to participation in a treatment programme or were simply due to other factors
- Programme evaluations should be replicated so we can establish which components of a programme contribute the most to overall effectiveness and for which types of people, under what circumstances, the service works best
- Studies should measure objective, quantifiable outcomes of youth crime and antisocial behaviour, and other variables of interest before and after programme participation
- The data gathered also needs to be subtle enough to capture changes in the frequency and severity of offending and not just its presence or absence in order to pick up the small changes that are often characteristic of interventions to reduce delinquency
- Future evaluations should be designed to measure the sustainability of outcomes that are attributable to an intervention by conducting follow up studies over longer periods
- Finally, they should be amenable to rigorous cost-benefit analysis enabling us to develop a far better understanding of the differential costs and benefits associated with selecting different suites of interventions.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.