

# Global Youth Work Behind Bars

How do you engage some of the most excluded young people in the country with global issues?

Y Care International ran a series of global youth work workshops with groups of young women at HMP New Hall Young Offenders Institution (YOI), providing them with the opportunity to participate in their global Youth Justice in Action campaign (YJIA).

## What did Y Care International want to achieve?

Y Care International works in partnership with young people worldwide through the YMCA movement to help them enrich their lives and to build a more just world, free from poverty. The aim of these workshops was to enable the young women involved to:

- explore overseas young people's experiences of youth justice and their solutions to related issues that affect them
- learn from each other: what experiences and problems do they and overseas young people have in common and how are these being tackled in different countries?
- explore the main experiences, problems and issues that affect young people in their home communities around youth justice, gangs, crime and the government's and communities' response and policies
- decide which issues young people, with the support of Y Care International, will campaign and advocate on, planning the main activities and structure of the campaign within institutional constraints.

## How did they set about doing this?

The workshops were planned to take the young women through YJIA issues affecting young people overseas, particularly in Honduras, and how they themselves are personally affected in the UK and within the confines of New Hall. The workshops were structured around four 1-hour sessions each day, involving four groups of around half a dozen 17-year-old young women.

The first workshop set the scene with a viewing of *City of Men*, a story of teenagers living in a Brazilian favela (slum) with its background of gangsters and poverty. This was followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences in experience of the young people in the film with the workshop participants.

Workshops 2 and 3 looked at the issues of gangs and the experiences of young people in prison in Honduras, where the system is corrupted by gang violence and extrajudicial assassinations. The groups compared their experiences with those of young people in Honduras, and considered whether these were pressing issues for young people in New Hall. They worked in groups to come up with ideas for raising awareness amongst their peers.

The final workshop asked 'What Youth Justice issues matter to me?', and focussed on what action they could undertake within the institutional constraints of the YOI. Participants worked in groups to develop the ideas from previous sessions and plan a campaign .

### **How well have they achieved their aims?**

This is a hugely difficult environment in which to deliver global youth work. There were constraints within the prison regime including young women being taken out of sessions, so at no stage were all the group in any of the sessions at any one time. There were also constraints around access to information and how the young women were allowed to respond. The young women had little experience of their voices being valued or listened to within the prison culture. However, some very good and interesting discussions were undertaken and Stuart Wroe, the workshop leader, found the young women invariably ready to participate and quick to make the crucial links between the global and the local, often related to their own personal experiences.

One activity which they all enjoyed doing was writing and receiving letters. In the final workshop, having recapped on the activities and learning of previous weeks and received an update of the deteriorating situation in Honduras, it was encouraging that in each group someone either verbalised the need to take action ('someone should do something about this'), and/or identified letter writing as an appropriate action. The letters were addressed to the young people involved in YMCA campaigning and advocacy actions in Honduras and were scrutinised by the prison authority in New Hall. When released these were forwarded straight away to Honduras to give support to the YMCA in its campaigning and advocacy actions.

### **What do they plan to do next?**

These sessions informed an extended series of global youth work sessions with young men in HMP Wetherby YOI. Y Care International and YMCA England's Offender Services Unit are currently looking at developing and establishing a programme of global youth work in YOIs across England.

The young women at New Hall related the experiences of young people in Honduras with their own local/ personal experiences including:

- Stigmatisation of young people, eg: tattoos; hoodies; stop and search; ASBOs
- Maltreatment of young people, eg: torture; strip searches; restraint; lack of privacy, safety or respect; no police protection
- Lack or inappropriateness of education/employment opportunities
- Unfair judicial responses, eg: Article 332 Anti-Gang Law; sex laws
- Lack of facilities for young people, eg: gangs are the only place where they receive respect

### Reflections:

- International NGOs have a role in making links between different countries in which they work and drawing out issues in an educational context.
- A key principle of global youth work is starting with the personal when exploring the world and making global connections. This project shows how this approach can generate solidarity and empathy rather than sympathy.
- The project also highlights the important lesson for young people that their issues and concerns are shared by young people the world over.

One thing I learnt today was...

*‘that I am listened to’*

*‘someone’s name in Honduras’*

*‘it’s not all bad in New Hall’*

*‘[about] torture’*

*‘we’ve got a good life in prison,  
not like the other people’*

*‘how people are getting badly  
treated in [Central] America’*

More information:

- Y Care International website: [www.ycareinternational.org](http://www.ycareinternational.org).
- Youth Justice in Action website:  
[www.youthjusticeinaction.org](http://www.youthjusticeinaction.org).

