



MILLION

**Submission to the All Party Parliamentary
Local Government Group: inquiry into
justice in communities**

30 April 2009



**"The 11 MILLION children
and young people in
England have a voice"**
Children's Commissioner for
England, Professor Sir Albert
Aynsley-Green



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Who are we?



11 MILLION is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green. The Children's Commissioner is a position created by the Children Act 2004.

The Children Act 2004

The Children Act requires the Children's Commissioner for England to be concerned with the five aspects of well-being covered in *Every Child Matters* – the national government initiative aimed at improving outcomes for all children. It also requires us to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC underpins our work and informs which areas and issues our efforts are focused on.

Our vision

Children and young people will actively be involved in shaping all decisions that affect their lives, are supported to achieve their full potential through the provision of appropriate services, and will live in homes and communities where their rights are respected and they are loved, safe and enjoy life.

Our mission

We will use our powers and independence to ensure that the views of children and young people are routinely asked for, listened to and that outcomes for children improve over time. We will do this in partnership with others, by bringing children and young people into the heart of the decision-making process to increase understanding of their best interests.

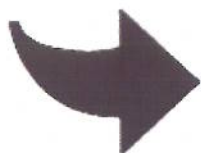
Our long-term goals

1. Children and young people see significant improvements in their well-being and can freely enjoy their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
2. Children and young people are more highly valued by adult society.

For more information

Visit our website for everything you need to know about 11 MILLION:
www.11MILLION.org.uk.

Introduction



This submission sets out evidence of effectiveness in youth crime prevention using a public health model.¹ It suggests that primary prevention approaches, tackling the socio-economic conditions that shape and underlie the majority of offending, are crucial if public services are to address issues 'upstream' before they become problems 'downstream'.²

This submission also looks at a number of secondary responses (where children are at particular risk of offending) and tertiary responses (where children have offended), and assesses their effectiveness.

Much of the evidence summarised here relates to serious and violent offending. It draws on 11 MILLION's work during 2008/09 to examine children and young people's involvement in gun and knife crime. This work included a literature review commissioned from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, which assesses high-quality international evidence over the last 10 years. We would stress that serious and violent crime make up only a small proportion of offending by children and young people, but make the point that good preventative principles – primary, secondary and tertiary – are applicable for children in many circumstances.

Failure to meet children and young people's material, social and emotional needs can lead to a range of problems during childhood as well as adverse outcomes in adult life. Offending is one of these. 11 MILLION therefore believes that the prevention of offending is best understood and practised as part of a continuum of policies and practices designed to ensure that children are supported to enjoy their rights and achieve good outcomes.

In line with our statutory duty to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), this submission draws attention to the relevant international standards to which the UK is party.

Fulfilling our statutory function to raise awareness of children's views, we have worked intensively with over 100 children and young people during 2008/09 to explore their experience of weaponised crime and the solutions they want to see. Some of these views are presented in this document.

Section 1: key points



- 11 MILLION supports a public health approach to crime prevention in relation to children and young people.
- Socio-economic conditions shape and underlie the majority of offending.
- Offending is one of a number of possible adverse outcomes for children and young people whose needs are not met.
- Crime prevention should be understood and practised as part of a continuum of policies and practices supporting children to enjoy their rights and enjoy good outcomes.
- Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood increases the risk that a child or young people will offend and continue to offend, over and above their individual and family risk factors.
- 11 MILLION supports the promotion of children and young people's civic participation as part of neighbourhood renewal.
- 11 MILLION recognises the value of predictive methodologies and tools, but urges sensitivity in their use to avoid the risk of 'labelling' individual children.
- Secure attachment to the primary care giver in early childhood is critical to reducing the risk of numerous adverse outcomes, including offending.
- Nurse home visitation programmes targeted at vulnerable parents have been shown to improve maternal and child outcomes.
- Parenting support programmes have been shown to improve outcomes for children at most ages.
- School programmes that address violence have been shown to have beneficial effects.
- More research would be helpful to understand the impact of physical activity and sport on reducing offending.
- 11 MILLION is concerned that the operation of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) is resulting in many children being criminalised for behaviour that is not necessarily criminal.
- There is evidence that informal warning letters are the most effective form of anti-social behaviour intervention for under 18 year-olds.
- There is evidence that, for serious young offenders, deterrence and punishment do not appear to have an impact on recidivism.
- Therapeutic foster care – 'intensive fostering' – has significantly reduced violence among young people in the US in comparison with control groups.



Section 2: primary prevention

This section looks at the factors in children's lives which may either increase their risk of developing offending behaviour, or which may protect them against developing such behaviour, even in difficult circumstances.

Risk factors

Table 1 below thematically summarises the key risk factors for serious and/or violent offending among young people.

Table 1: key risk factors for serious and/or violent offending among young people³

<p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - family management problems - family conflict - parents take part in problem behaviour/approve of it 	<p>School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - early and persistent anti-social behaviour - academic failure beginning in early school years
<p>Rebelliousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - friends engage in serious and/or violent juvenile offending - early initiation into such behaviour 	<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - availability of firearms - norms favourable to crime - low neighbourhood attachment and community disorganisation - extreme economic deprivation

It should be noted that in the case of early onset offending – which can lead to the most serious and prolific offending – associations between risk and offending are particularly closely related to family and individual level factors,⁴ whereas for most offending socio-economic factors weigh more heavily.

Community risk factors

11 MILLION believes that effective crime prevention is closely linked to poverty reduction, the promotion of opportunity and the widening of civic participation to include people of all ages.

Children and young people living in deprived areas do not just experience higher levels of crime, but also suffer from other problems, including poverty, low social capital and limited social mobility. The impact of multiple problems is complex and cumulative. The more social problems are encountered by families and individuals, the more likely they are to remain in poverty.⁵ Many areas of concentrated deprivation comprise of housing stock that was owned and administered by local councils. Although originally intended to improve the lives of working-

class people, it has been argued that an unintended effect was “the virtual ghettoization of some estates”.⁶



“If you know you’ve got a good chance of doing something with your life then you would really want to make sure you behave and keep out of trouble” – Male, 15, from Merseyside

Poverty and inequality have become entrenched in localities where, in the absence of employment or meaningful material assistance, involvement in various forms of crime may be one of the few ways to actually make a living.⁷ The lack of economic opportunities for young people has stimulated the growth in both the US and the UK of illegal economies around drugs, stolen goods and protection.⁸ A UK study of convicted gun offenders concluded that illegal drug markets appear to “significantly underpin the criminal economy [representing] the single most important theme in relation to the illegal use of firearms.” Violence levels connected to drug markets operations appeared to increase significantly “towards the street (retail) end of the market.”⁹

Living in a neighbourhood where there is violence makes it likely that at least some young people will actually see a violent act or, worse, will be victims of violence. Both these types of experience can have long-lasting effects. Experiencing violence - either as a victim or witnessing other people being the victims of violence - in fact increases the likelihood that young people will experience mental health problems such as depression, will abuse drugs and alcohol, or will perform poorly at school. It will also increase the likelihood of them being violent and carrying weapons.¹⁰

Research has also highlighted that young people who experience multiple victimisation as traumatic often end up seeing the world as fundamentally unsafe¹¹ and perceive existence as lacking meaning. They may also come to think that their own life could end at any time and therefore disregard how their current actions will influence their future.¹²



“Sometimes the system makes you think there’s no way of getting out. If you try to get a job and you write down that you are from XXXX, you might have a slight chance. But if you say XXXX, they’re just going to put it in the bin” – Male, 18, from Manchester

Wikström and Loeber found evidence of the differential impact of neighbourhood effects in an analysis of data from the Pittsburgh Youth Survey.¹³ The research found that, for those young people who had a high number of risk factors, there was no discernible neighbourhood effect upon serious offending. However, young people who should have been better placed to stay out of trouble – because of protective factors, or of risk factors being balanced by protective factors, in their lives – nonetheless tended to become involved in serious offending, although starting at a later age. This was found to be a result of neighbourhood effects. This suggests that even for young people with many positive aspects in their lives, prolonged exposure to the various risk factors that are present in areas of concentrated deprivation may ultimately have a negative impact on behaviour.

Such findings are echoed in a study of youth offending and anti-social behaviour in Edinburgh, where the main factor associated with whether a young person continued to offend or not was found to be the neighbourhood where the young person lived. “Continuing to offend was more common in deprived neighbourhoods, whereas desistance was more common in advantaged ones. Also, desistance was less likely in neighbourhoods perceived to be disorderly, and where residents were dissatisfied with the neighbourhood.”¹⁴



“There’s nothing to do. So kids just do what they do, and they might go wrong. There’s nothing to motivate the kids so what’s going to happen? Round here is like a ghost town” – Male, 18, from Manchester

Play and leisure facilities

Children’s right to play and leisure is set out in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Riyadh Guidelines state that:

“A wide range of recreational facilities and services of particular interest to young persons should be established and made easily accessible to them.”¹⁵

Central and local government have recognised the importance of play and leisure in children’s well-being as well as in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. However, despite considerable new investment, the situation is not yet satisfactory. A nationally representative survey of more than 1,700 children and young people by 11 MILLION confirmed that disadvantaged children and young people see fewer leisure and play facilities in their local environment than their better off peers.¹⁶ The gap was large for facilities that demand expensive physical infrastructure: 67 per cent of children from the higher socio-economic

groups feel they have local sports pitches, compared to 58 per cent of their less well-off peers, and 50 per cent of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children. The gap was almost as marked, however, for less site-specific activities: 27 per cent of well-off children said they had a drama group locally, compared to 22 per cent of their less well-off peers, and 15 per cent of BME children.

Community regeneration and children's participation

Crime prevention and community regeneration need to go hand in hand. 11 MILLION believes that children and young people can and should make a positive contribution to the process of regeneration.¹⁷ Their views should be sought and taken seriously, in line with their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC. The Riyadh Guidelines specify that

“Young persons should have an active role and partnership within society and should not be considered as mere objects of socialization or control.”¹⁸

Evidence suggests that, although crime and other negative aspects of living in deprived areas tend to erode the capacity of neighbourhoods to manage themselves, a high level of ‘collective efficacy’ can reduce the prevalence of crime, even in low income areas. Research has found that, controlling for a wide range of individual and neighbourhood characteristics, a high level of collective efficacy directly predicted lower rates of violence.¹⁹



“When adults respect me, and other teenagers, and treat them as adults, we feel as if we have more responsibility and this helps us respect each other more” – Female, 17, from South West

Protective factors

Most children and young people at risk of violence or crime do not actually manifest such behaviour, even though they may well have been exposed to a variety of risk factors. This has led to attempts to identify those factors in young people's lives which reduce or negate the impact of risk factors. These factors are referred to as protective factors and their contribution to young people staying out of trouble is known as resilience.

Protective factors include positive relationship with parents, high academic achievement, positive friendships with non-offending peers, extracurricular school activities, belonging to families with fewer children, good problem-solving skills and empathetic skills. Some protective factors can be seen as being the opposite of risk factors, for

example young people not being exposed to violence compared with young people who are exposed.

While many risk factors have been replicated in numerous studies, more research is needed around the relative importance of protective factors and how they can be introduced into the lives of young people at risk of violent behaviour.²⁰ The way in which protective factors impact on children at different ages would also benefit from being studied in greater depth.

Section 3: secondary prevention



This section looks at some of the targeted interventions which can reduce the risk of vulnerable children becoming involved in offending.

Targeted interventions and the potential of labelling

Agencies working in criminal justice use predictive tools which assess how likely somebody is to offend. Usually these tools are scales based on factors identified as having a statistical relationship with offending, such as those discussed above. Such predictive tools score a person according to how many and which risk factors are present in their lives.

11 MILLION believes that, when appropriately used, predictive tools play a useful role in identifying the needs of individual children and families. For example, 11 MILLION is supportive of the early identification protocols established for children and young people at risk of serious violent offending in some local authorities. Those making up part of Lambeth Council's Young and Safe: Young People and Violent Crime Strategic Action Plan are examples of this.

However, there are problems with relying on statistical risk prediction alone, as they can lead to people being dealt with unfairly or can lead to potentially dangerous people being ignored or overlooked. In reality, someone identified as likely to offend may not actually do so. On the other hand, some people identified as low risk may go on to carry out a violent crime. Risk factors are just that – factors which put some young people at risk of carrying out violent behaviour. This does not mean that they will they inevitably do so.

Caution needs to be used, therefore, in trying to apply these types of predictive tools to groups of young people. Treating all those who have a high number of risk factors as potential criminals may actually draw more of them into the criminal justice system – what is referred to as net widening. There is no evidence that early intervention by the criminal justice system has a positive impact upon young people and, indeed, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime found that early contact with the criminal justice system was a predictor of later, more serious contact.²¹

Research by Derzon illustrates the need for caution when trying to predict violence. Derzon carried out a meta-analysis combining and analysing the results of 60 prospective studies of juvenile violence.²² He examined whether it was possible to establish a link between early anti-social behaviour and later violence. While predicting some violent crime, his findings did not support the notion of an underlying trait in individuals

which would make them bound to commit violence in later life. Many of the young violent offenders in the studies had not previously exhibited any of the general risk factors for crime. Predictive methods had failed to identify 66 per cent of those who later became violent. This calls into question the notion that there is an immutable progression toward violent behaviour for many young people who engage in anti-social behaviour.

The Riyadh Guidelines caution against labelling children as “delinquent” or “pre-delinquent”, as this “often contributes to the development of a consistent pattern of undesirable behaviour by young persons.”²³ However, the guidelines recommend strengthening services that “respond to the special problems of children who are at social risk.” The guidelines describe these as “helping measures”, in which “respect for individual rights should be ensured.”²⁴

Support for childhood and the family

Witnessing or coming into contact with abuse and violence in one’s immediate environment, including family, school and neighbourhood, is one factor which may be linked to carrying out criminal activity and abusive behaviour in the future.²⁵ Stress and trauma are reported to be associated with specific types of conduct, like assaults, weapon-carrying and use, participating in gang violence and being arrested.²⁶ For example, one well-designed study which controlled for age, sex and race, found that people who had been abused or neglected as children had a significantly greater likelihood of being arrested for a violent offence than people in the control group.²⁷ Interventions that focus on early family life aim to defuse or neutralise such risk factors as poor child rearing or poor parental supervision, and promote secure attachment.



“You can look at a family’s background and you can see how that kid might turn out. It’s not going to be good for a kid if that family has problems, you know, like parents who are into crime. But it doesn’t mean that that’s that. You can get in there and talk to them and get through to them and make a change. It’s not too late” – Male, 18, from Manchester

Different types of early parent training can be used, including coaching, peer modelling, role playing and reinforcement techniques. Evidence shows that parent training is an effective method of preventing offending, though not necessarily violent offending.²⁸ For example The Incredible Years, a programme devised by Webster-Stratton, was shown to reduce childhood anti-social behaviour in an experiment conducted in the UK. Training, covering praise and rewards, setting limits and handling misbehaviour, was given to the parents of 58

disadvantaged children aged three to eight who had been referred for aggressive and anti-social behaviour. After the intervention, not only had the anti-social behaviour of the children “decreased significantly” compared to that of the control group, but the parents who had received the training gave their children more praise to encourage desirable behaviour and used “more effective commands”.²⁹

A major Family and Parenting Institute review identified that parent and family focused interventions for children and young people in mid and late childhood can have positive outcomes.³⁰ However, systematic reviews of parent training in families with children under three years-old have found mixed results. One, which looked at the impact of group-based parenting programmes, as researched by five high-quality studies, found that there was “insufficient evidence to reach any firm conclusions regarding the role that such programmes might play” in the prevention of emotional and behavioural problems in children.³¹ Another review of training for parents of children aged up to and including three also found seven high-quality relevant studies, concluding that the beneficial effect of the interventions, as identified by such studies, was “modest”.³²



“Your family life plays a part. If you have been brought up with manners and respect then there’s less chance. You should be brought up with respect. If the mum and dad do nothing or smoke weed or drink. It’s what you see and what you are brought up around” – Male, 18, from Manchester

Nurse home visitation programmes

Some interventions that target family-related risk factors in early childhood seem to be having long-term positive impact. Randomised clinical trials of nurse home visitation programmes have in fact shown that they reduce the risks of early anti-social behaviour, child maltreatment, maternal substance abuse and maternal criminal involvement. These are all problems associated with future youth offending and violence.³³ Programme evaluations have identified long-term positive effects. These include, according to a 15 year follow-up of home visitation programmes in Elmira, New York, and Memphis, Tennessee, the observation that children who had been included in the interventions displayed “relatively few serious delinquent and violent behaviours.”³⁴

School

School programmes which aim to address or prevent violence include a variety of initiatives, for example social skills training, tutoring, anger

management, impulse control and bullying prevention. Several programmes have parent training and teacher training elements.³⁵

A popular policy in US schools is zero tolerance which, in practice, means suspension or expulsion for incidents of violence, or for carrying a weapon to school.³⁶ However, there is lack of evidence that this is effective in changing behaviour or improving safety. In fact, some studies have shown that zero tolerance is related to increases in community crime, exacerbates problems in schools and adds to drop-out rates.³⁷ On the other hand, schools which encourage a sense of collaboration and involvement and a common set of goals and norms endorsed by young people tend to experience less violence.³⁸



“Each secondary school should have its own PCSO [Police Community Support Officer] – we have them and fights have been reduced and we feel safer” – Male teenager, Blackpool

A meta-analysis of school-based psycho-social prevention programmes found overall positive effects on aggressive and disruptive behaviour.³⁹ The study examined 249 experimental and quasi-experimental studies of the following types of programmes:

- Behavioural strategies, such as rewards or good behaviour contracts.
- Cognitive techniques, which focus on changing thinking skills, for instance problem solving or anger control.
- Social skills training, for example communication skills or conflict management.
- Counselling and therapy, in group, individual or family settings.
- Peer mediation.
- Parent training, including skills training and family group counselling.

The interventions covered by the meta-analysis were both targeted and universal and the ages involved ranged from pre-kindergarten to 14 years-old and up. The authors concluded that:

- Overall, the above school-based programmes, which had been studied by researchers to a rigorous standard, have “positive effects” on “aggressive and disruptive” behaviours.
- “The most common and most effective approaches” were universal programmes “delivered to all students in a classroom or school” and programmes targeted to specific children who participated “outside of their regular classrooms”. In both situations, the most frequently used were cognitive programmes.
- “In the absence of evidence that one modality [universal programmes] is significantly more effective... than another

[targeted programmes], schools might benefit most by considering ease of implementation when selecting programs”.

The meta-analysis also established that “larger treatment effects were achieved with higher risk students”. Additionally, the universal programmes seemed particularly to benefit “students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds”, while in the targeted programmes “it was students already exhibiting problematic behaviour” who showed “the largest effects”.⁴⁰

After-school recreation

A systematic review of the impact of after-school recreation found three programmes which had been tested to a rigorous standard. Each programme was community based and had “desirable” effects on youth offending or crime.⁴¹ However, the very small number of rigorously assessed interventions means that after-school recreation does not, at the present time, demonstrate evidence of proven effectiveness. Nevertheless, this community-based approach is regarded as “promising” in preventing youth offending or crime, especially when it includes skills training for participants.⁴²

Social skills training

According to a meta-analysis of 55 randomised controlled experimental studies, the most effective social skills training interventions use a cognitive-behavioural approach, such as skills building, teaching identification and avoidance of potentially violent situations, or problem solving. They are applied to young people aged 13 and over and to high-risk, or higher risk, groups already showing some behavioural problems.⁴³ A previous quasi-experimental study of one such programme for middle schools in the US had shown positive short-term effects as violence by students declined.⁴⁴ Social skills training has also been shown to be promising in relation to serious young offenders and as part of after-school recreation.

Behaviour monitoring and positive reinforcement

Programmes where students are supervised and where positive behaviour, like attendance and academic progress, are reinforced are among the ones which have been proven effective in decreasing youth offending and improving educational performance. Such programmes tend to address a variety of risk factors, for example academic failure, social alienation, low commitment to school, violent peers or aggressive behaviour, and to introduce protective factors, such as social and cognitive competencies, bonding to school or positive behavioural norms.⁴⁵

Physical activity and sport

It is a commonly held belief that participation in sport or physical activity has the potential to improve the life chances of disaffected young

people and to bring about psychological and social benefits. Some current UK policies and funding streams are based on the notion that young people's offending behaviours can be reduced in this way. However, "the link between physical activity interventions and developing pro-social behaviours is not straightforward, and there is a lack of credible research evidence to support many of the claims made for physical activity... to inform decisions about effective intervention design". There is therefore a "pressing" need for "credible" monitoring and evaluation of physical activity programmes and of their outcomes.⁴⁶

Cost effectiveness

A Rand Corporation study found that three diversionary programmes – parent training, monitoring of high school students with offending experiences, and cash incentives for disadvantaged students to graduate – would be twice as cost effective in reducing crime than California's then punitive policy of 'three strikes and you're out', meaning custody after three offences.⁴⁷

Section 4: tertiary prevention



This section looks at the evidence for interventions designed for children and young people who have criminally offended or become involved in anti-social behaviour.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) are civil orders, not criminal penalties. However, the operation of ASBOs has resulted in many children being criminalised for behaviour that is not necessarily criminal. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in its report on the UK in 2008, stated that “instead of being a measure in the best interests of children, [ASBOs] may in practice contribute to their entry into contact with the criminal justice system”.⁴⁸

Of children breaching their ASBO, 42 per cent ended up in custody. It appears that children are being treated more punitively for breaching their ASBOs than adults: the average sentence of custody for breach for a child is 6.4 months, while for an adult it is 4.9 months.⁴⁹

There is evidence of discrimination in the issuing of ASBOs to disabled children. Over a third of those under 17 issued with an ASBO have a diagnosed mental health disorder or learning difficulty, and this does not appear to be taken into account when issuing ASBOs and setting conditions.⁵⁰

Research by the Youth Justice Board found that ASBOs have been issued to children with no history of offending, and in circumstances where a less punitive response would not only have been more proportionate to the class of behaviour, but beneficial in terms of preventing the risk of early criminalisation associated with ASBOs.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the UK Government conduct an independent review on the ASBOs with a view to abolishing their application to children. 11 MILLION supports this recommendation.

Warning letters and Anti-Social Behaviour Contracts

Evidence from the National Audit Office⁵¹ indicates that, in terms of preventing further offending, informal warning letters are the most effective form of anti-social behaviour intervention for under 18 year-olds. ASBOs are the least effective measure for preventing anti-social behaviour among under 18s. The Audit Commission's report suggests that greater account must be taken of children and young people's need to associate with their friends and access public space when conditions are imposed.⁵²

Children and young people involved in serious offending

Systematic reviews have been conducted in the US which examine interventions' effects on youth offending by conducting randomised controlled experiments involving young people who have already offended.⁵³

A meta-analysis of 200 experimental or quasi-experimental studies examined intervention programmes for serious juvenile offenders with an average age of 14 to 17 conducted between 1970 and 1999. It found that deterrence and punishment do not appear to have an impact on recidivism. Conflict resolution programmes, on the other hand, were found to be effective in helping serious young offenders, most of whom had a history of aggressive behaviour, deal with conflict without resorting to violence and to reduce re-offending.⁵⁴

Interventions which were found to be most effective for non-institutionalised young offenders, such as those under supervision in the community, included the following:

- Individual counselling
- Inter-personal skills training
- Behavioural programmes

Interventions which were most effective for young offenders in institutional custody, meaning criminal justice institutions or in residential social services care, included:

- Inter-personal skills training
- Teaching Family Home, a programme aimed at changing behaviour, where a small number of young offenders, six to eight, would live in the community with two 'teaching parents'. The young people would go to local schools and be supervised by the teaching parents, and would be able to go to their own homes at the weekend.⁵⁵

According to a systematic review of family and parenting interventions for young offenders aged 10 to 17 and their families, such interventions have beneficial effects on reducing the time they spend in institutions. The authors also stated that these interventions "may" also reduce rates of later arrest, "but at present these results need to be interpreted with caution, because of diversity in the results of studies."⁵⁶

In what is known as intensive therapeutic foster care, young people aged 12 to 18 and considered to be chronic offenders are placed in strictly monitored and supervised foster homes and isolated from offending peers. The foster parents are trained to provide a structured environment for learning social and emotional skills, and the adolescents undergo weekly individual therapy. At the same time, their biological parents learn behaviour management techniques.

Therapeutic foster care forms part of Blueprints - youth violence prevention programmes endorsed by the US Justice Department as they meet rigorous criteria. For example, they have undergone

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experimental design trials which have provided evidence of a statistically significant effect on youth offending, lasting at least one year after treatment.⁵⁷ A systematic review carried out by the US Task Force on Community Preventive Services found sufficient evidence to recommend the use of this intervention: violence among young people in therapeutic foster care was found to have reduced by an average of 72 per cent compared with control groups.⁵⁸

An “intensive fostering” programme based on this model is currently being piloted in England.⁵⁹



“People with criminal records cannot get jobs, so offenders re-offend, and it’s very difficult to break that cycle. We should concentrate on rehabilitating and educating rather than sending them to prison for what are not that serious offences” – Male, 17, from North London

Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) is a rehabilitative programme for young people who exhibit serious and chronic offending behaviours. MST focuses on multiple risk factors and systems of influence: schools, peers, family and neighbourhood. It uses family therapy and parent management training and consists of brief, intensive treatment sessions carried out by one therapist operating across all the different domains.

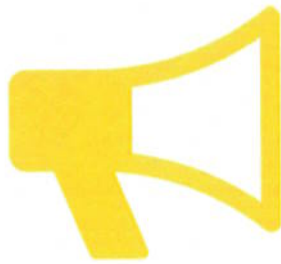
MST has been one of the first clinical interventions addressing serious, violent offending and crime which has been subjected to randomised trials. Evaluation results have been mixed. A 1999 study found positive outcomes: families which had been randomly assigned to it showed increased cohesiveness compared to those receiving other interventions, and young people given MST were found to be less likely to be re-arrested and to spend fewer days in custody.⁶⁰ However, a large-scale independent evaluation, carried out in Canada, did not find MST better at reducing convictions than traditional probation-based programmes.⁶¹ While a meta-analysis found that MST was effective,⁶² a systematic review of the evidence concluded that the efficacy of the programme was not proven.⁶³ Littell’s methods and analysis were criticised by the originators of the treatment.⁶⁴

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