

Profiles of People who Offend

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A profile is an outline as seen from one side or a vertical cross section of a structure.

In this paper I present what David O'Mahony, various research assistants and I discovered about inmates in the Young Offenders' Centre (YOC). This group of 17 to 21 year old young men generate more offences than any other. They form the core of any Probation caseload.

The information is derived from four annual surveys of all inmates in the YOC in the course of research into the Centre's drug strategy and Opportunity Youth's through care programme. These surveys represent like much empirical research one slice of reality albeit sliced on four occasions. We used a structured interview schedule to interview every inmate in the YOC over a period of about four days. The questions were based upon other similar surveys and consequently may confirm current constructions of criminality. We could have asked other questions and have presented to you a very different picture of these young men. I also want to explore how data can be looked at from different perspectives each of which will produce different practices and results.

SEE – DO - GET



A Profile of the Young Offender Centre Inmate Population

The four inmate surveys of YOC inmate population (2002-2005) found that:

- Although they were predominately single, about one in four had children.
- Around 20% were effectively homeless
- Over 80% had been suspended from school and half had been expelled from school
- Over two thirds of participants had no formal educational or training qualifications
- Only about one in five were employed before their committal to the YOC
- The average age at which participants started to offend was thirteen
- Two thirds of participants (66%) had been in the YOC previously
- Two thirds of participants (66%) had relatives who had been in prison
- Over two thirds of participants had been subjected to paramilitary threats or assaults
- 9% of pre-release participants had a history of attempted suicide and 11% had a history of self-harming behaviour
- Almost a quarter of participants had received psychiatric/psychological help (23%) within the YOC.
- Almost two thirds of participants (65%) said drugs and/or alcohol were included in their main expenses
- Almost all of the participants drank alcohol (98%) and half (50%) began drinking before they were fourteen
- Over two thirds of participants went on drinking binges
- There was a link between alcohol and crime for 80% of participants and nearly two thirds of participants (63%) admitted that their alcohol use was one of the reasons why they were in the YOC
- Almost a quarter of participants (24%) felt they had a drink problem, but only 6% said they had received help in the community relating to this problem
- The vast majority of participants (97%) used drugs in the month before their committal to the YOC

- Cannabis, Ecstasy and amphetamines were the most commonly used drugs in the year before committal (used by 87%, 74% and 62% of participants respectively)
- Half of the participants used cocaine (50%) and 5% used heroin in the year before imprisonment
- Over two thirds of participants (68%) said that they took drugs every day or at least every other day
- There was a link between drugs and crime for 64% of drug using participants
- 44% said that drugs have caused problems in their lives
- 71% said that drug use has been a significant factor in their offending behaviour
- 55% noted that the crime for which they were currently incarcerated was drugs related

Each of the four surveys has shown that inmates in the YOC tend to be drawn from some of the most vulnerable and marginalized young men in Northern Ireland. They often have experience of a disrupted family situation and have been excluded from education and training, from the housing market and the labour market. In addition, a high proportion of inmates have substantial criminal histories, have previously been in custody in the youth justice system, have a family history of criminality and most of them have been subjected to paramilitary threats and punishments.

A high proportion of inmates in each survey drank so excessively they placed their physical and mental health at risk, and most related their use of alcohol to their offending behaviour, including violent behaviour. Evidence from the four surveys also consistently showed that most inmates coming into the YOC have regularly used a wide range of drugs and are much more likely to have used drugs than young people of a similar age in the general population. Furthermore, a clear link was revealed between inmates' drug and alcohol misuse and their offending behaviour.

Significantly, the YOC inmate surveys provided evidence that the drug culture among inmates had begun to decrease since the introduction of Opportunity Youth's Positive Steps initiative in October 2000. Although illicit drug use in the YOC was shown to be a problem in each survey (as shown below) there was a consistent drop in the proportion of inmates who admitted to having used drugs in the YOC. There was also

a marked increase in inmates' knowledge that help was available in the YOC for drug and alcohol problems, and there was a marked increase in positive relations between staff and inmates since the initiative was introduced.

Drug Use in the YOC	Sept 2000	Feb 2002	Feb 2003	Mar 2004
• Use of drugs in the YOC	67%	55%	48%	51%
• Drugs are easily available in the YOC	66%	54%	41%	55%
Awareness of Information in the YOC				
• Knowledge of drug education availability	50%	86%	83%	92%
• Help & advice about drugs are available	55%	84%	80%	86%
• Information about drugs is easily available	53%	85%	70%	84%
Perceptions of Prison Officers				
• Most prison officers are fair	56%	66%	66%	62%
• Treated well by prison officers	31%	50%	59%	51%
• Discuss personal problem with prison officers	33%	41%	48%	44%

The vast majority of participants (86%) did not want to re-offend, or specified that they would not re-offend post-release. However, a third (33%) of participants thought it was 'very likely' or 'likely' that they would offend post-release. Inmates reported that unless they receive highly structured and intensive support immediately upon release they were likely to drift back to their previous lifestyle even when they do not wish to.

A quarter of the participants (27%) said they had not re-offended post-release (compared to 54% at 6 weeks). The findings from the reconviction analysis showed that 36% of those in the through-care sample were recommitted within twelve months of their release compared to 40% of those in the comparison sample.

Risk Management

This awareness of the reality of these young men's lives creates the opportunity and responsibility to choose the most appropriate response. The primary policy goal for Probation has become public protection. Consequently the reality outlined above tends to be understood by Probation Services through the framework of risk factors. The nature of these young men's histories, circumstances and life styles are seen as increasing the risk of offending and in some cases the risk of inflicting serious harm

on others. On the basis of such empirical research a model of risk management has been developed and standardised as the core method of probation practice. This involves assessment, classification by level of risk, a risk management plan specifying intensity and regularity of contact and programmes addressing the risk factors all of which is enforced rigorously.

Two books examining this model were published in 2004, What Matters in Probation edited by George Mair and What works in Probation and Youth Justice: Developing evidence-based practice edited by Ros Burnett and Colin Roberts. Their conclusions are not encouraging. Working with referrals from courts whose risk of offending is generally lower than previously the Probation Service has struggled to engage individuals in completing accredited programmes. Results in relation to reducing reconvictions have been disappointing. Strictness of enforcement appears to have little impact on the overall reconviction rate. In the meantime, custody rates in England and Wales rise steadily.

This approach's lack of effectiveness has been criticised due to its lack of real engagement with the reality of people who offend and a lack of social support provided to enable people to improve their circumstances.

Protective Risk Management

Here is another similar profile of young people who persistently offend engaged in a programme in an area of Scotland.

- 75 were engaged in the programme.
- Aged up to 19, most were aged between 14 and 17
- Most had committed their first offence before the age of 14.
- The most common offences among referrals were assault (20.5%), theft (18.2%) and house breaks (15.9%). The Team also dealt with fire-raising, attempted murder and sexual offences.

Identified Need	Number of young people
Offending peer group	71
Alcohol issues	45
Drug issues	45
No qualifications	45
School exclusion/refusal	42
Family has problems (alcohol, drugs, mental health, offending)	36
Unemployed	32
Young person has family problems	29
History of being looked after	28
Homeless	18
Previous custody	17
Mental health	15
Developmental issues	10

Learning disability	9
Self Harm	8
Child protection	7

Statistical information has been collected from police records on the offending of each referral in the year prior to engaging in the youth justice programme. The 75 engaged in the programme had been responsible for 859 offences in the year prior to referral. Almost all the referrals were certainly persistent offenders – averaging 11.5 reported offences in the past year. One had committed 44 offences while another had not offended prior to referral.

The 64 who completed the programme committed 240 offences while under supervision. This represents an average of less than 4 offences each over a period of a year.

Of the 64 who completed the programme it was possible to monitor the offending record of 25 one year after completion. This group committed 196 offences during this year representing average of around 8 offences each. The offending rate of five of these young people got significantly worse. This means that 20 or 80% reduced their offending.

The above figures suggest that young people who offend persistently, taken as a whole, reduce their per annum offending by 65% while participating in the programme and by just over 30% for one year after completing the programme. This represents a significant contribution to community safety.

	Young People	Offences	Average per person
One year prior to the programme	75 enrolled	859	11.5
Committed during the programme	64 completed	240	3.75
One year follow-up	25	196	7.85

In relation to reducing re-offending among a group of very prolific offenders the programme has succeeded in keeping one young person out of three out of trouble while subject to supervision and one out of five during the year after the programme had been completed. During supervision over 90% of young people either did not offend or significantly reduced their offending. One year after the programme nearly 70% had desisted or reduced their offending.

	During the programme	One year after the programme
Did not offend	33.3%	20.7%
Offending reduced	58.3%	48.3%
Offending increased	8.3%	31%

What distinguishes this programme from typical current probation practice. Both aim to manage the risk to public safety that offending poses. It is my contention that the risk management approach adopted in England and Wales is framed within a punitive policy agenda emphasising the personal responsibility of the individual and rigorous

enforcement. Punitive risk management reduces the active engagement of the individual and under-estimates the importance of social support. The Scottish model is what might be defined as protective risk management. I would argue that it holds the individual more actively accountable for behaviour while providing the support required to lead a law abiding life. Significantly it defines the individual not as saturated in risk factors but as excluded from protective factors.

The working relationship between the police and the Youth Justice Team is very active. A strong protocol on sharing information has been agreed and is working. This has resulted in the Youth Justice Team receiving reports of young people's offending within a day. Consequently the Team can challenge young people who have offended very rapidly and adapt their programme immediately to take this into account. Leaving the young people "no hiding place" in this way has enhanced the Team's effectiveness considerably. Yet this high level of accountability was not experienced as punitive.

The team have adopted a young person centred¹ rather than a risk centred approach. In spite of all the excitement and rewards of a criminal lifestyle, none of the young people said that they were happy while they were offending. One young man described his life: "Pretty rubbish. Committed a lot of crime. Getting drunk. Not confident about myself. Nothing else to do. Slightly unhappy at home. Expelled from school because I assaulted a teacher."

Some felt depressed – "felt very low"; "life was a waste of time." Typically they not getting on with their parents or there was conflict between their parents. One said; "Mum was a danger to me; caused a lot of troubles." They were running away from home, drinking alcohol, and not going to school. One was addicted to gambling machines. Some remembered feeling angry a lot of the time. Some had a history of being looked after by foster parents and in children's homes. In retrospect many believe they were doing things to show off and be popular with their peers.

Almost every young person said they were a bit or a lot happier now than when they were offending regularly. Only one person said he was not happier than before the programme. Most felt better about themselves. "Now I care what happens to me." One young man stated that he was not as angry as he was – "People like me more." A young woman said "I have matured a lot. I realise now the things I was doing before were stupid." "I have learnt that I am important." A young man talked about what he learnt from the programme; "If I respect people, they are likely to respect me. I can achieve things." Another said; "I do help out with younger ones. I'll speak to them and sort them out. I don't want others going through what I did."

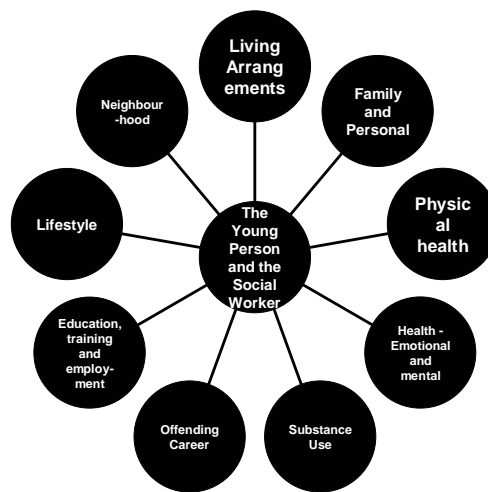
How has this programme succeeded in both protecting the public by reducing offending and rehabilitating young people?

The aim of the strategy is to enable young people to desist from offending while maintaining them in the community. It does so by identifying and supporting those resources or protective factors which young people need if they are to stay out of trouble.

¹ This model is based upon Chapman T (2000) Time to Grow Russell House Publishing.

These are termed “domains”:

- Family and personal life;
- Lifestyle or recreation;
- Education, training and employment;
- Neighbourhood;
- Living arrangements or accommodation;
- Physical health;
- Emotional and mental health;
- Substance use;
- Offending behaviour.



The strategy is based upon certain key premises:

- a young person who persistently offends is likely to have a range of unmet needs;
- the young person’s offending behaviour and anti-social attitudes are likely to place a great deal of stress on the very resources that he or she needs most;
- often it is just when the young person needs these resources most that those who can help give up on him or her;
- custody is likely to result as much from these domains being unable to cope with the young person’s behaviour and consequently to meet his or her needs as from the young person’s criminal behaviour;
- custody is likely to reinforce criminality.

When a domain such as a family or school cannot deal with the young person’s needs or deeds, it tends to expect specialist professionals to take the problem away and sort it out. This process may exclude and marginalise the young person thus increasing the risk of further offending and making custody more likely.

Rather than exporting the problem, the Moray strategy strives to support the domains in an active and practical way until the pressure eases. It does so through partnership including social services, education, housing, health, police, and the voluntary sector. For example if child care social workers are struggling to provide the intensity of contact required by a young person who persistently offends, they can enlist the support of the Youth Justice Team. If a hostel is threatening to evict a young person due to unacceptable behaviour, the team will allocate a member to work in the hostel temporarily. If a family is struggling, the team will offer a few days respite. If a school is not keen to re-admit a young person the team will offer to accompany a young person throughout the school day. If the court sees no alternative to secure accommodation, the team will hire a holiday home and maintain 24 hour supervision through two members of staff. These temporary measures usually allow the primary resources in the young person's life to recover and resume their responsibilities.

Significantly the one area in the strategy that has not succeeded is enabling the young person to take a central role in organising his or her network. This continues to be led by professionals. This lack of agency may cause the increase in offending once the programme has been completed and is a weakness in this systemic approach.

A Desistance approach

Both the protective and risk factor frameworks are based upon positivist research models and tend to neglect the critical importance of agency. Recent research into desistance has addressed this deficit. By asking individuals how they desisted from crime rather trying to find out what made them offend, researchers such as Stephen Farrell and Shadd Maruna have rediscovered agency. Farrell came to the startling conclusion that probation supervision was not a significant factor in desistance. This rather subverts the core of probation practice. Both risk management and the 'What Works' strategy have emphasised what probation staff should do to achieve public protection. This had led to demanding national standards of practice and accredited programmes. These have become ends in themselves. However, effective practice should be measured by what those who offend do not what workers do. Processes are only important in relation to the results they achieve

Farrell found that the critical determinants of desistance were the individual's motivation and improvements in social circumstances both of which probation practice can support. Shadd Maruna's delves more deeply into the motivation of desisters. He found that what distinguishes them from persisters was the script or story they had adopted to make sense of their lives and behaviour.

	Persisters – Condemnation script	Desisters – Redemption script
Core belief	I am bad	I am basically good
Cause of offending	Me	'It'
Sense of agency	Nothing I can do	I can control my destiny
Future prospects	No one will let me; so why bother	I want to contribute to society.

A clear model of practice has yet to emerge from these findings. It is likely to include the following components:

- therapeutic and practical support to actively readjust the individual's narrative from 'condemnation' to 'redemption'
- a focus on the future
- plan to strengthen motivation, to manage shame more effectively and improve circumstances
- holding the individual accountable, providing support, and offering opportunities for service to others

This model does not require the presence or active participation of the victim. Yet it is clear how a restorative approach would strengthen it.

Restorative risk management

The restorative approach is based upon the assumption that when someone is harmed by another, there is more at risk than the victim's and potential victims' safety. The Youth Conference Service's practice addresses the risk to safety, to justice and to control of all parties to a crime, the person harmed, the person responsible for the harm and their communities.

The evaluation of the Youth Conference Service found that the primary concern of most people who have been harmed. Once they have an experience of justice that means something to them personally, they attention often turns to the future welfare of the young person who has harmed them. This has resulted in many imaginative programmes led by the community and relevant to victim's perspectives.

Conclusions

When profiling people who offend it is necessary to avoid a one side fits all approach and adopt a flexible and creative approach to our responses. For a small, dangerous minority a rigorous risk management approach is undoubtedly necessary. But most offenders require the resources that keep most of us out of trouble for most of the time. This requires a community based, inter agency approach. However, the positive results of this model are unlikely to be sustained unless the individual radically changes their core beliefs and their ways of seeing themselves and their communities. Restorative processes can be very effective in such transformations but they must be supported by longer term practical programmes.

In general principles I would recommend

1. a gradual transfer of authority and agency from the centre to those people most closely involved in and affected by harm;
2. avoiding labels and practices which reinforce the condemnation of individuals rather than their behaviours;
3. adopting a more person centred (both for people who harm others and those who are harmed) and community based approach;
4. broadening the definition of public protection to include issues of justice and control rather than just safety;

5. offering individuals the opportunity to make positive contributions to the community in ways that they, the people they have harmed and their communities understand.
6. understanding that working with these individuals and their communities in these ways is highly skilled, requires good training and management and cannot be done cheaply;
7. evaluating and improving practice on the basis of outcomes.

Four Profiles of People who Offend

	Risk Factors	Protective Factors	Desistance Factors	Restorative Factors
Authority	Centralised agency	Partnership	The individual	All parties
Identity of the individual	Offender	Person who offends	Person who wishes to desist	Person responsible for harm and person harmed
Role of professional	Active reorganisation of thinking and behaviour	Active reorganisation of resources	Active reorganisation of the narrative	Active reorganisation of relationships
Assess	Risk of offending and harm – focus on the past	Availability and resilience of support – focus on the present	The individual’s script or story and social circumstances – focus on the future	Opportunities for and threats to safety, justice and control – focus on the past present and future
Plan	To manage risks	To strengthen network of support	To strengthen motivation, to manage shame more effectively and improve circumstances	To make amends and to avoid further harm
Methods	Contact, programmes addressing risk, enforcement	Partnership, resources, coaching, programmes,	Responsibility, support, service to others	Apology, commitment, reparation, victim oriented programmes, mentoring
The individual’s experience	Being analysed, classified, managed, corrected and controlled	Being listened to, engaged, supported and held accountable	Being listened to, affirmed, acting positively, and being held accountable	Being included and actively participating
Measures	Reduced reoffending Critical incidents	Reduced reoffending Improved circumstances	Sustained desistance Pro-social behaviour Improved circumstances	Victim satisfaction Reparation Improved circumstances Reduced reoffending