

Prevention in youth justice

November 2017

This briefing summarises evidence about what works to prevent youth crime, and shares practice examples from Youth Offending Teams in England and Wales. We are using the term prevention to refer to work carried out with young people on the cusp of offending, or who have committed a low-level offence and been diverted from the formal justice system. Prevention aims to keep young people away from crime and the criminal justice system.

Evidenceⁱ suggests that involving children in the criminal justice system can increase future offending. Youth Offending Teams need to strike a careful balance between working with young people and protecting the public, but avoiding early or escalating involvement in the justice system that can increase risk of harm.

Risk factors

There is strong evidence about risk factors for offendingⁱⁱ - a mix of personal, environmental and social factors:

- poor or inconsistent parenting
- lacking self-control or self-esteem (relative to their age)
- living in a deprived area
- living in an area with weak or chaotic social bonds
- exclusion (or frequent absence) from school
- aggressive behaviour
- anti-social behaviour
- alcohol or substance use
- delinquent peers

What does the evidence say?

We looked at what evaluation and research advises about preventing youth offending. In this briefing, we focus primarily on young people with no convictions, but where there are risk factors or concerns. There is good evidence about known risk factors for youth offending (see box). Evaluation of prevention work is less developed, but shows that interventions which address the risk factors or boost protective factors can reduce problem behaviours or offending. As with other types of intervention, good assessment of, and engagement with, young people are key ingredients of effectiveness.

Diversion programmes offer a way to route young people away from the systemⁱⁱⁱ. Evidence suggests that the most effective schemes refer young people to other services tailored to their needs. Diversion programmes which referred young people to clubs and activities, or even taking 'no further action', still resulted in lower offending than formal processing in the justice system.

Programs that include **self-control or social competency elements**^{iv} are effective. These tend to use instruction, practice and activities to help children to improve self-control and their ability to engage in prosocial activities. The most effective^v programmes used behavioural or cognitive-behavioural techniques. **Social skills or employment skills** programmes were less clearly effective, but are still associated with reduced offending.

There is evidence that interventions which teach **parenting skills**^{vi} are effective at improving parenting and reducing problem behaviours amongst children. However, the research on parenting classes has tended to focus on families with young children. For ages 10 to 17, there is more evidence to support the use of **family therapies**^{vii}. This recognises that an adolescent's behaviour is often related to their family and peer group. Family therapies tend to focus on addressing family problems and improving communication skills^{viii}.

Evaluations have found that **school-based programmes** can reduce bullying and aggressive behaviour^{ix}. These programmes had a positive impact on substance use, attendance, and behaviour. The variety of outcomes and measurement means we need to be slightly cautious with the evidence, but overall the effects are positive.

School programmes were effective when delivered to the whole school or class, but tended to work best when they were more targeted. Targeting must be done sensitively to avoid stigma or labelling effects. A school setting could be a strength in that regard by avoiding an overt connection to offending; but this was not tested in the research.

Mentoring may be effective in preventing young people from offending. Some programme evaluations^x - including higher quality trials – have found mentoring reduces offending. Although other studies produced neutral results. There is also evidence to support techniques that can be used in, or alongside, mentoring such as **motivational interviewing**^{xi}.

There is strong evidence that **deterrence-based schemes** can **increase youth offending**^{xii}. This includes programmes that inform young people about the consequences of crime, as well as confrontational approaches like 'Scared

Straight'. **Discipline- and control-based programmes**^{xiii} such as 'boot camps' were **ineffective at reducing offending**.

Many approaches described in our briefings on reducing reoffending^{xiv} and trauma-informed practice^{xv} are also used with young people at risk of offending. **Positive activities** are also used as part of prevention work. This evidence base is less developed in relation to offending but positive activities are often evaluated for other purposes. They can engage young people, address some of the known risk factors for offending, and have shown other positive effects for young people. Examples include sports^{xvi}, arts^{xvii}, and horticulture^{xviii}.

What are YOTs currently doing?

The Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice consulted Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) to understand more about their work to prevent youth offending. A summary^{xix} of the responses was published on the Resource Hub alongside this paper.

The prevention initiatives offered varied between areas. This shows YOTs responding to different needs and local priorities. It also seems to depend on how prevention work is funded. Different funding criteria can affect what type of activity is delivered. Yet YOTs are targeting similar groups: children involved in anti-social behaviour, aggressive behaviour, or substance use; and families involved with the Troubled Families Programme¹.

We asked YOTs what kind of methods they used. This focused on 'early help' where there were concerns about problem behaviours. Common methods included:

- family support
- youth work
- mentoring
- alternative education, training or employment (ETE)
- sports, arts, music, or gardening.

¹Troubled Families is for families in England. Some areas have re-named their local programme.

Practice Examples

In addition to responding to our questionnaire a number of YOTs also agreed to be interviewed in detail about their prevention practices and projects. The table below summarises some of the main points. You can learn more about these projects on the [Youth Justice Resource Hub](#).

These summaries are from the examples identified through the interviews with YOTs. There are other practice examples and resources about prevention [here](#) on the Resource Hub. We are pleased so many YOTs said they already visit the Resource Hub to find practice ideas and advice for prevention. We hope you will continue to support us to develop this. You can [contact us](#), or click [here](#) to find out about submitting your work.

Approach – Area	Summary
<i>Family COACH – Hackney</i>	In response to emerging evidence of the strong correlation between bereavement or being a victim of a crime and later life gang involvement, Hackney piloted a time-limited Family COACH pathway. This was to identify how best to deliver a prevention programme for children at risk of gang involvement and their families; involving group work with parents and children, family work and community engagement. Tailored approaches that build young people’s resilience, whilst also addressing a holistic range of issues and needs by co-ordinating with other services and partners worked. The distinct care pathway for children and families was more effective at engaging families. Opportunities are now being explored to provide a version of the intervention in the community with local housing providers.
<i>Youthink – Sutton</i>	<p>Youthink is a voluntary, early intervention service for young people aged 8-17 years in the London Borough of Sutton. The young people referred have been identified as at high risk of offending or anti-social behaviour. The service accepts referrals from others such as schools, police and Children’s Services. Youthink also provides the area’s triage scheme, for young people with low-gravity or first-time offences.</p> <p>Youthink provides assessment, advice and information, and short-term interventions either on an individual or group basis. Their regular group programmes tackle issues such as knife crime, anti-social behaviour, healthy relationships, and internet safety. Youthink also deliver problem-solving meetings to bring together the family (or carer) and professionals to identify an action plan.</p>

	<p>Youthink also works with local schools. They host workshops for pupils and have started to develop Community Resolution initiatives in schools. The initiatives are based on restorative justice principles. The aim is to reduce criminalisation of pupils, find ways to repair harm, and to resolve conflict in the school community.</p>
<p><i>Targeted Youth Supported Team – Bolton</i></p>	<p>In Bolton, there is a ‘Targeted Youth Support Team’ overseen by the YOT manager. The team deliver most of the prevention work in the borough. Initially TYS focused on anti-social behaviour. This has developed to include broader welfare concerns and support for children on the cusp of care.</p> <p>The team takes a partnership approach, working closely with others including the community safety and area policing teams. They provide one to one support and group interventions in various settings across the borough including in the young peoples’ homes and schools. A range of intervention tools and support services are used with young people and families, but also to challenge negative behaviours. The objective is to help young people and families make (and then sustain) positive changes.</p>
<p><i>Youth Support Worker – Brent</i></p>	<p>Brent have used funding from MOPAC to employ a Youth Support Worker to support gang affected young people. The worker provides assessment and short interventions. For longer-term, or more intensive, support the Youth Support Worker can refer young people to relevant local services and charities. This includes a mentoring service from the St Giles Trust specifically for gang affected young people.</p>
<p><i>Linking prevention to the local Early Help & Neglect Strategy – Durham</i></p>	<p>The Early Help & Neglect Strategy outlines how early identification of need and multi-agency support will work in Durham. This includes the involvement of the voluntary and community sectors. The Youth Offending Service’s (YOS) role in this is to provide assessment and intervention when young people first come into contact with the police, and consideration is being given to caution or charge.</p> <p>Outside of statutory supervision, the YOS provide prevention support through the Pre-Caution Disposal (PCD) to these young people. This is targeted at links between risk factors for offending and key Stronger Families themes (Stronger Families is Durham’s Troubled Families programme). Stronger Families is</p>

	<p>main-streamed in Durham. All practitioners 'Think Family' and can act as lead professional.</p>
<p><i>Triage and key working – Hillingdon</i></p>	<p>Hillingdon YOS provide triage for young people who have come to police attention and are admitting low level offences. Young people receive a rapid but holistic assessment which seeks to identify interventions and referrals to appropriate agencies. Young people and families who have multiple risk factors can also be referred to the key working service. The key working service provides one to one support, as well as helping to engage families with services.</p> <p>As part of the prevention offer young people can be referred to: Asphaleia specialist learning centres; Safe CSE support; Kicks sports programme; Sorted substance use service; Link counselling service; Kiss sexual health; and the Axis Project for those at risk of serious youth violence or gang involvement.</p>
<p><i>Impact / Youth Inclusion and Support (YISP) – Leicestershire</i></p>	<p>Impact is a street-based project to target anti-social behaviour. Target areas are identified by partners including police, community safety and local schools. Young people involved in anti-social behaviour receive a warning. If there is further contact with the Impact team then the young person is referred to the YOS.</p> <p>The YISP offer is a three-tiered approach and takes referrals from schools, local councils and the early help referral system. Young people have a full AssetPlus assessment, and 2 contacts per month for up to 6 months. Interventions are the same as those available for statutory youth offending work.</p> <p>YISP work with young people who have family members who have offended, have a peer group with at least 2 friends with convictions, are looked-after or post-adoption, or have received a warning for anti-social behaviour. If young people have multiple risk factors (or they also have a mental health issue / have previously been a victim) they receive an enhanced programme.</p>
<p><i>Diversion referrals – Suffolk</i></p>	<p>The Suffolk diversion programme makes prevention referrals to the YOS for young people at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour. The YOS and police deliver the programme and support. Young people receive individualised packages based on assessment of need. The assessments take place at home rather than a justice setting, and use the Pathway and Planning section of AssetPlus. The support may include positive activities,</p>

	<p>offending behaviour work, parenting support, and other support as appropriate. Catch 22 also deliver a Positive Futures programme in parts of Suffolk. NHS England funds a Liaison and Diversion scheme operating in police custody and court.</p>
<p><i>Prevention team – Wiltshire</i></p>	<p>The key objective of the service is to offer practical advice, support and direct case work to prevent issues escalating and requiring statutory intervention. Wiltshire have a small team of prevention staff. The YOT works in partnership with other services tailored to the young person’s needs, their offending (or risk) behaviour, and a range of positive activities.</p> <p>The Police are asked to refer young people in a range of circumstances including where they have concerns, or where action like a Community Resolution or other Out of Court Disposal is being considered. Referrals can also come from schools, the courts, the Anti-Social Behaviour Risk Assessment Conference, the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, and from social care. Working with the prevention team is voluntary. Young people who accept are assessed using AssetPlus and agree an individual programme of support based on this.</p>
<p><i>Youth Inclusion Projects (YIP) – Leeds</i></p>	<p>Leeds commission the YIP which is run by Barca (a local charity). The service has been running for the past 8 years. The YIP is for children aged 8-13 years identified by partner agencies as being most at risk of offending, anti-social behaviour, exclusion from education, of entering care, or where the family has had significant contact with the police.</p> <p>Young people are allocated a named key worker to support them and develop an action plan based on their strengths and barriers. Support can include one to one work, group work, and access to positive activities in their area.</p>
<p><i>System tool – Ceredigion (Wales)</i></p>	<p>The YOT has developed a local screening tool for prevention cases. This was introduced to manage prevention referrals and to target resources effectively. The aim is to develop an evidence-based approach to assessing young people referred to the YOT prevention service. The tool is used to identify whether there is low or medium/high risk of offending, and to assess vulnerability and well-being. The screening is informed by information about children and young people from: the Police National Computer, children’s services,</p>

a local authority education database, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services records.

The YOT has been working with Aberystwyth University to develop, validate and evaluate the tool. They have been tracking over 300 cases for 12 months after their involvement with the prevention service. Preliminary results show that 60% of cases are assessed as medium/high risk, which is the priority group for the YOT. The University and YOT are continuing to monitor outcomes. This includes looking at the types of interventions being offered and which are most effective.

References

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