Make Me a Criminal

Preventing youth crime

Executive summary

Julia Margo and Alex Stevens

February 2008

Institute for Public Policy Research

Challenging ideas – Changing policy

About ippr

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank, producing cutting-edge research and innovative policy ideas for a just, democratic and sustainable world.

Since 1988, we have been at the forefront of progressive debate and policymaking in the UK. Through our independent research and analysis we define new agendas for change and provide practical solutions to challenges across the full range of public policy issues.

With offices in both London and Newcastle, we ensure our outlook is as broad-based as possible, while our international and migration teams and climate change programme extend our partnerships and influence beyond the UK, giving us a truly world-class reputation for high quality research.

ippr
30-32 Southampton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 7RA
Tel: +44 (0)20 7470 6100
info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org
Registered Charity No. 800065

This paper was first published in February 2008.

About the author

Julia Margo is an Associate Director at ippr and head of the Directors' Research Team. She is also editor of ippr's political journal *Public Policy Research* (PPR), published by Blackwell. Previously, Julia spent four years at the *Sunday Times* as a commissioning editor on the *News Review* and prior to that she worked as a parliamentary assistant to Paddy Ashdown MP and Simon Hughes MP. Her publications for ippr include *Population Politics* (2006), *Freedom's Orphans: Raising youth in a changing world* (2006), *Beyond Liberty: Is the future of liberalism progressive?* (2007) and *Politics for a New Generation: The progressive moment* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007, ed, with Nick Pearce).

Acknowledgements

Make me a Criminal could not have been written without assistance from many people and organisations. ippr would particularly like to thank Lady Hamlyn and the Helen Hamlyn Trust, and the Gatsby Trust, for their financial support.

The author would like to thank the external experts who have commented on drafts of the different chapters and/or provided original analysis for our work. Thanks particularly for the time generously given by Leon Feinstein at the Institute for Education, David Blunkett MP, Lady Hamlyn, Kate Gavron from the Young Foundation, and Lord Ramsbotham. Thanks also to Nick Pearce, Neil Sherlock from KPMG, Susan Hitch, and Janice Hiller from the British Psychological Society for their intellectual support.

I am also very grateful for the advice and guidance supplied by colleagues at ippr. Many thanks to Sonia Sodha for carrying out the data analysis that informed the research. Particular thanks are also due to Kate Stanley, Carey Oppenheim and Joe Farrington-Douglas, and also to Matt Jackson, Georgina Kyriacou, Victoria O'Byrne and Richard Darlington in our external affairs department. Thanks are also due to Benjamin Leibowitz and Meghan Benton, who provided research support. However, the views expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

Executive summary

This report makes the case for a more therapeutic and family-based approach to youth offending, as opposed to the present, more punitive, system. The arguments for the proposed approach appear persuasive – not only on humanitarian grounds, but also in terms of economics and efficacy.

The UK suffers from two related problems that define the terrain within which youth crime is debated. First, evidence seems to show that we experience higher and more sustained levels of youth crime and anti-social behaviour than culturally similar countries. Second, the UK public experiences more fear of crime and concern about youth misbehaviour than citizens elsewhere. In turn, UK citizens are known to favour more punitive responses to youth crime than those in Sweden, Finland or Germany, and are less forgiving of youth misbehaviour.

But this may be changing. There is emerging evidence that sections of the public do increasingly accept that a more welfare-orientated approach to youth crime would be fairer and more likely to succeed than current approaches – particularly if poor parenting were tackled. A progressive policy agenda for crime reduction can therefore find moorings in public attitudes, although the task is a difficult and complex one.

How do policy and attitudes need to change?

Despite the impressive progress in youth policy, such as that set out in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' Children's Plan (December 2007), there have been mistakes both in the previous legislative agenda on youth offending and in the discourse around, and response to, young people and social change.

This paper argues that:

> Primary-level, universal strategies must improve the capacity of communities including families, local community, schools, early years education and youth activities to socialise norms of behaviour and respect for communities. This is particularly important in light of social change affecting these institutions.
>
> Secondary-level, targeted strategies must improve the capacity of social services, health services and specialist programmes to both reach and improve the behaviour of the most-at-risk groups, such as those committing anti-social behaviour, showing emotional problems, or having problems at school.
>
> Tertiary-level reforms must improve the capacity of criminal justice system to both punish and rehabilitate offenders.

At the primary level of prevention, problems exist at the family and community level – partly because social change has undermined the time spent between adults (and parents) and young people, and because engagement in communities is, on the whole, less constructive. Schools are also unable to adequately socialise the most-at-risk because children and young people tend only to come into contact with welfare support when already displaying serious risk factors such as truancy. The most 'at risk' (in this case, excluded pupils) are inadequately supported, even though these are the children and young people most likely to commit crime, breach an order or end up in court.

Secondary-level programmes do not seem to reach the most-at-risk often enough, and are not always based on the real evidence of what works in diverting at-risk young people away from crime. There is not enough joined-up service provision.

Approaches to tackling youth offending

In the UK we lack a single agency responsible for early intervention, such as the ministries for youth and family that exist in Germany and Austria, although the new Department for Children, Schools and Families, working with the Ministry of Justice, may rectify this. Specific (secondary) community-based

prevention work is nearly exclusively targeted on children at risk, and mostly includes leisure activities, mentoring or educational training such as those via Sure Start. However, these are aimed at very young children and families, rather than the 5–12 age group, for which prevention strategies are thought to be most effective. This is different to countries such as Finland, Sweden and Canada, where primary school age children are served by additional universal leisure, therapeutic and family interventions and activity offers, and where emphasis is on using these methods.

According to the Youth Justice Board, in the UK we spend 11 times more on locking up our young people as we do on prevention projects to stop them getting involved in crime in the first place.

Cool to be criminal? Impacts of social change

Contrary to public perception, the UK does not experience significantly worse crime than elsewhere, but it does appear that the UK suffers more intractable and higher levels of anti-social behaviour than other countries in Western Europe.

Relationships with peers

Several social trends have combined to change the context in which young people develop their social and emotional skills. These have altered the amount of time children spend with adults outside school, and the kinds of activities they participate in after school. As a result, we are less likely to see the more affluent, more advantaged young people on the streets as they are increasingly involved in extra-curricular activities, while the more-at-risk are spending more time unsupervised with their peers.

Meanwhile, it appears that there are changes to youth culture and attitudes, with young people becoming less trusting of authority and more heterogeneous in their views of social issues.

It appears that British young people are being given both increasing autonomy over certain areas of their lives at younger ages (their social, consumer and sexual lives) and not so much meaningful responsibility (in terms of having families, jobs, and independent living). At the same time, messages about what is 'cool' in terms of behaviour are set increasingly by advertisers and peers rather than parents. Many analysts have argued that children are unable to cope with the complex and adult environment that they now need to navigate from an ever-earlier age, and that this is increasing levels of anxiety and rebelliousness in younger groups.

Public fear

Adult society has begun increasingly to fear and demonise young people. Studies have shown an increased media and political focus on youth anti-social behaviour, and changes to youth justice policy, such as lowering the age of criminal responsibility to 10, have been perceived as encouraging high levels of concern about youth misbehaviour, and to encourage Britons to be more likely to hold young people independently responsible for their misbehaviour than people in other countries.

Despite all this, it is important that we are not fatalistic about social change. Many policy levers exist that can respond to the changed landscape of youth and redefine the role of families, communities and the institutions of government in young people's lives, as we show below.

Risk factors for offending

Research shows unequivocally that it is possible to identify those individuals most at risk of committing offending behaviour. Longitudinal studies show that the most prolific offenders start early, between the ages of 10 and 13, and have longer criminal careers than other criminals, lasting on average 13 years.

The following factors emerge as particularly important in explaining why some young people offend:

- Having a parent who is an offender, poor relations with parents and not spending much time with parents
- Disorder in the local area and lack of adult intervention in youth activities
- Lack of extracurricular activities and having little or nothing to do in the local area

- Having peers and siblings who offend
- Spending more time with peers than parents
- Truanting or being expelled from school.

In addition, several protective factors emerge – in other words, factors that reduce the probability that a young person will offend:

- High levels locally of collective efficacy (the willingness of adults to actively maintain local civic norms)
- Engaging in positive socialising activities and having lots to do locally
- Having a good relationship with parents
- Having positive peer relationships
- Enjoying the school experience and getting a lot from it.

Emotional and mental health factors often emerge as being strongly linked to anti-social and offending behaviour. Although socioeconomic factors remain absolutely key to young people's behaviour, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds being much more likely to offend than more affluent young people, indicators of emotional well-being at age 10 – locus of control (the degree to which events are perceived as being within their control), self-esteem, and some behavioural and emotional indicators – have a significant relationship with behavioural outcomes at age 16.

Raising children: influence of familial and social context

Cohort analysts shows that young people who have strong, supportive family relationships are more likely to develop good social and emotional skills. Research suggests that the nature of the interaction between parents and child is more important than structural factors such as income and parental education in predicting the development of social and emotional skills. Specific elements of parenting, such as providing stability and security, and authority without hostility, are proven to be particularly important in positive social and emotional development.

But parenting is not the only factor that matters. An analysis by ippr of the 1970 British Cohort Study also shows that some extracurricular activities are positively associated with higher self-esteem and better capacity to manage behaviour. These activities must take place in a group setting, with a clear hierarchy, clear and well-defined universal aims, and consistent meetings.

Activities that combine the appropriate level of skills acquisition, hierarchy, interaction with adult authority figures and constructive activity include:

- Regular sport, drama or arts-based activities
- Activities that involve working towards a long-term goal and in which skills are acquired
- Cadet training that combines both of the above.

Activities that are associated with offending include:

- Regular unsupervised socialising with peers in disadvantaged, high-crime areas
- Regular socialising with anti-social young people without supervision.

In addition, low collective efficacy in the local community is one of the most accurate predictors of high levels of anti-social behaviour in England and Wales. The central idea here is that collective efficacy does not make residents more likely to intervene in serious crimes, rather it enhances their preponderance to intervene in the precursors of crime, for example by discouraging the gathering of teenage gangs or drug taking. Thus interventions which encourage collective efficacy in communities are likely to impact positively on youth anti-social behaviour.

Recommendations

ippr's research suggests several problems with the current approach to preventing offending. One of the most important is the level at which we intervene. There is not enough being done at the primary level (that is, to prevent crime before it occurs) to tackle the broader causes of offending. Second, once an individual is displaying risk factors, or has committed an anti-social act, the nature of the intervention needs to be directed at preventing that behaviour from being repeated, rather than on empty punishments. Hence the recommendations relating to the reform of anti-social behaviour legislation focus on directing young people towards support, rather than on merely punishing them for their behaviour, as too often happens at present.

The recommendations below are necessarily broad in range and scale. They aim first to tackle the culture that permits or even encourages youth offending, and second to target at-risk young people with the right interventions and programmes.

The recommendations are divided into primary and secondary forms of prevention.

Primary prevention

1. Tackling child poverty and in-work poverty

The unavoidable connection between poverty and criminality reminds us once again of the importance of tackling child poverty. Recommendations on how this agenda should move forward, particularly in terms of tackling in-work poverty, are advanced in other work by ippr (Cooke and Lawton 2007).

2. Better support for families: towards a worker/carer model

Strategies to better support families to spend time with children and teenagers are key to responding in a progressive way to social change. Too often, there is a discernibly fatalistic approach to social change. There is a sense that we will never return to the 1950s 'golden age' of nuclear families and stay-at-home-mothers, and this is true.

But we are certainly not heading towards moral and social decline. There are a great many reforms and policies that can help us move as a society towards another golden age – that of a 'worker/carer' society in which caring is valued as much as work. This does not mean, as some have claimed, replacing parenting with professional childcare services and looking to programmes and services to repair the job of poor parenting (the 'professionalising out of childhood'). What it does mean is providing the right balance of support and service to families so that they in turn may balance their working and caring responsibilities more effectively.

The range of reforms to support better work-life balance for parents and families previously identified by ippr (see Bennett and Cooke 2007) should be acted upon. These include:

- Better childcare provision
- Better support for, and greater availability of, flexible working for families with older children
- Better parental leave packages – particularly, better paternity leave to ensure that fathers are able to undertake proper caring roles in families.

Below we focus on areas in which new recommendations are needed.

3. Protecting children: banning corporal punishment

The Government has previously ruled out moving further towards the banning of physical punishment by parents. But it should reconsider its position in light of the evidence presented in the report, as well as for moral reasons. More than 40 years of research show that hitting children increases the chances of aggression, anti-social behaviour and criminal behaviour. Recent studies have demonstrated beyond doubt the causal relationship between physical punishment and increased aggressive behaviour.

Parents should be banned from any form of physical punishment of children. This would not only

reduce criminality in the long term, but would also send out a message about the kind of society we want to be – one in which violence and physical abuse are not tolerated – and send a message to children that they will be treated as we expect them to treat others, and that the law is there to protect them as well as to enforce norms of behaviour.

4. Better provision of activities for 12- to 18-year-olds

Extra-curricular activities for all young people should be provided in every local area, with funding sources for structured extra-curricular activities consolidated into one fund. Moreover, the £80 million that the Ministry of Defence spends each year on the Combined Cadet Forces (CCF), mainly in independent schools, should either be diverted to funding CCF units in schools in deprived areas, or continue to fund only those CCF units in independent schools that attract a certain amount of attendance (say a minimum of 50 per cent) by children at state schools in deprived areas.

Providers of structured extra-curricular activities in deprived areas should be able to apply to this consolidated fund in order to improve and increase provision within their local area. But in order to have an impact on outcomes, these activities would need to have the characteristics that we know are important in improving emotional and social development in young people. In other words, they need to be structured and hierarchical, give opportunities for progression, provide consistency and be regularly attended. Activities would therefore need to be accredited as fulfilling a minimum number of set criteria.

5. Supervised play areas

The Government should invest in a new programme of supervised play areas in disadvantaged, urban areas. These would be staffed adventure play parks, integrated with structured activity (for example, in parks outside Children's Centres and Youth Hubs). This is in line with plans set out in the DCSF's Children's Plan. It would involve:

- Rolling-out a Play Ranger programme, starting in disadvantaged areas
- Integrating landscaped play sites into Youth Hub design and planning
- Providing staffed adventure playgrounds in disadvantaged areas
- Initiating a workforce development programme for the play sector, with recruitment focused on local adults
- Offering subsidised access to indoor play areas for disadvantaged young people.

Further plans should be made to tackle traffic-safety issues in urban areas, and to make areas more child friendly.

6. Supporting collective efficacy

There are several ways in which changes could be made to planning and regulation policy that would help to support a richer variety of public spaces and places where people can meet. Among the most important ideas might be:

- Carrying out regular audits of 'congregational spaces' in each neighbourhood to be conducted by local authorities
- Introducing an 'Investor in Community' badge for commercial developers
- Preparing better strategies for involving local people in planning
- Ensuring that the development and use of shared space supports the above recommendations
- Introducing targets to encourage the development of local activities that are collective and participative. To this end there should a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target to encourage collective and community-led cultural activities – particularly among those from priority groups and in disadvantaged communities and those that encourage the mixing of different age groups.
- Charging local authorities with drawing up Community Plans promoting the long-term welfare of their areas.

Other measures should promote the active engagement of adults in maintaining civic order in their local areas – for example:

- 'Face the public' sessions initiated by the Government's Respect Action Plan should be expanded to mirror the model of Safer Community Councils developed in New Zealand. In these sessions, parents, local authority representatives, teachers from local schools, representatives of young people's groups, local women's groups, local business and church groups meet regularly with the local police to debate community issues.
- Schools should be encouraged to set up parent groups to mutually agree on rules for children. There are several examples of inner-city London schools taking the initiative in setting up parent groups, which meet regularly to discuss and agree on acceptable behaviours for students. There is currently a lack of evidence of the effectiveness of such schemes, so it would be worth investing in a series of pilot schemes to test the value of these and other initiatives.

7. Welfare teams in primary schools

The system of welfare support in English and Welsh schools is not focused enough on early intervention, and the statutory framework only kicks in when children begin to miss school – by which time it is more difficult to re-engage children and young people with their education. There is not enough coordination between schools and social services to pick up on problems when they occur at an early stage.

Local authorities should employ 'welfare teams' comprised of at least one child psychologist, a child psychiatrist, a family worker, a counsellor and a school nurse to undertake school visits. These teams should be based within schools. A similar approach in Alberta Province, Canada, suggests that one team should service no more than three schools in a local area, on a rotating cycle, to meet with children and monitor their welfare. These teams should be made available to all children, and should meet with each child at least once a year. They should be tasked with referring children and their families to appropriate support services, and would replace the current role of the school welfare officer.

Secondary prevention

8. Sure Start Plus: a targeted approach for at-risk 5-12s

There is a clear need for a coordinated, properly targeted but national service for children at risk of crime – particularly for those of primary school age – that tackles those factors within families and communities that can lead to youth crime. This public service should be introduced in line with previous ippr recommendations – particularly the idea behind 'Sure Futures', recommended in previous ippr work (Edwards 2004) – a service designed to address the needs of older children and teenagers.

Sure Start Plus would be an extension of the scheme of the same name currently being piloted with teenage parents and their children. It should be a coherent service that reaches those children who are at risk of prolific offending from ages 5 to 12: a Sure Start Plus programme directed at keeping young children out of crime that would push forward the gains made at Sure Start for the age 2-5s. Ultimately, this should be developed and implemented in a broader, more inclusive way in order to reach all parents, following a primary, not secondary, approach, although this will depend on resource availability.

Although provision and services offered should be responsive to local need, Sure Start Plus should offer the following types of intervention that are already offered in some parts of the country, across the nation:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy to address impulsiveness and other personality traits that lead to criminal activity
- Multisystemic therapy for those with the most complex needs
- Intensive education interventions for those with poor literacy attainment
- Targeted parenting programmes such as functional family therapy.

Touching hard-to-reach groups

The scheme should be targeted geographically at the most deprived areas, but we need to be aware that this in itself will not necessarily reach the hardest-to-reach groups. We therefore suggest a dual approach: first, geographical targeting, second, an element of individual entitlement for at-risk children to ensure that the service reaches those who need it the most. Otherwise, children's ability to access the intervention may well be limited by lack of parental interest or other factors which make it difficult for the poorest to attend. One way in which this could be delivered is through individual budget-holding, currently being piloted in 16 areas.

9. Reform of ASBO legislation

Anti-social behaviour legislation should be explicitly framed as a way of directing the most at-risk young people and their families towards appropriate support and services in order to divert young people from crime:

- Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) should not be used on children younger than 12 unless accompanied by Family or Parenting Orders. Instead, Family and Parenting Orders should be used to improve the family context in which the behaviour occurs, or to ensure appropriate care for the child in extreme situations, such as foster care or additional service support for the family.
- Individual Support Orders should be used where appropriate, alongside Family and Parenting Orders, to target the social context in which offending occurs – in other words, to direct children to purposeful activities in the local area and ensure their attendance.
- All children and young people aged up to 18, should be assessed in all cases as a matter of course before being given an ASBO.
- ASBOs for older children under 18 should be scaled back from the current 2- to 10-year limit to 6-24 months.

10. Outreach schools

Huge variation exists in provision for pupils excluded from mainstream schools in England and Wales, with a marked 'insider-outsider' culture. Ensuring that there is real, engaging provision for these groups should be an essential component of an improved prevention strategy. In a future publication, ippr will recommend the introduction of Canadian-style 'outreach schools' (Sodha and Margo 2008, forthcoming). In Alberta Province, such schools (which have the same status and follow the same curriculum as state schools, but with a more flexible timetable) operate from disused buildings and shop fronts in the local area.

In the UK, subsidised by local authorities, outreach schools would offer learning opportunities that were less structured than those in mainstream schools, combined with on-site therapists and social workers, to young people who have been excluded from mainstream provision. These schools should offer a mixture of guided independent learning and class-based learning, and should be staffed by fully qualified teachers with training and experience in working with young people with challenging behaviours. They should offer a higher level of pastoral support than traditional schools.

Decriminalising children

Alongside this, we must continue to challenge and question the language used in media and by public figures (including politicians) to describe young people, and to refute the claim that young people are somehow distinct from mainstream society. Recognising the responsibility of adults to the younger generation may not be a challenge that policy – beyond involving parents in treatment and punishment of child offenders – can solve alone. Rather, cultural change will be crucial too.