

On the brink



*changing lives
reducing crime*

Close to the brink

In 2008, Nacro's conference – Back from the Brink – examined approaches to steering young people away from crime.

Three years on, things have moved on and crime is down. There are encouraging signs that recent policies have made a positive difference and the number of young people in custody is lower than ever. Fewer young people reoffend. Those who do reoffend commit fewer crimes, and the number of young people coming into the criminal justice system has fallen.

Yet public concern about youth crime and antisocial behaviour remains high and concerns have heightened following the riots in England in August 2011. At a time when the prevailing call is for policies that appear tougher, we must hold out for policies that are smarter.

In these straitened times, it is more important than ever that we spend public money wisely, and stick to what works.

We know what works: we must change the way young people think and the way they solve problems. We must implement and manage programmes for young people well. And we must target those young people who are most likely to get involved in crime and those who are least likely to grow out of it if left to their own devices.

On the brink

Getting in early means intervening before young people get properly involved in crime. And when it comes to getting in early, Nacro knows what works.

Stopping and thinking

Young people in trouble tell us that problem solving is a bit like tossing a coin. Wherever the coin lands dictates how they will approach the problem. More often than not, this haphazard way of tackling issues lands them in more trouble. Teaching young people to solve problems in a better way helps steer them away from crime – the summer 2011 riots demonstrate only too well the importance for young people of stopping and thinking when friends are getting involved in crime, and of finding other ways of taking out their frustrations.

Learning

Young people in trouble seldom do well at school. And not every school does well with young people in trouble. But helping young people to continue their learning, whether in school or out of school, is vital to steering them away from crime. We must work with young people so that they build a stake in their education, in an environment which is conducive to their learning. This means working with the right mix of students in small groups. It may also mean being creative about where learning takes place.

Back from the brink

It means setting rules which are applied consistently, rewarding constructive behaviour and taking prompt and appropriate action to minimise disruption.

Mentoring

Whilst mentoring in and of itself is unlikely to reduce crime or reoffending, the equivalent of a day a week with a trained mentor helps young people to participate in, and engage with, programmes which do. Removing barriers to compliance must be the focus of any mentoring relationship with young people who are likely to offend, and participation levels must be the measure of success.

Doing positive things

In the last 15 years youth crime prevention activity has included positive activities for young people. When highly structured and properly supervised, these activities open up new possibilities for young people and help provide a bridge to education, training and employment.

Building a ring of confidence

Working together with the police, with schools, with parents and with families is key to steering young people away from crime. Teaching parents to deal consistently and rationally with delinquent behaviour, confronting the negatives and rewarding the positives builds a ring of confidence around the young person and reduces the impulse to indulge in antisocial acts.

Most young people who get involved in offending grow out of it. Some don't. Those who constantly reoffend tend to have a wide range of needs and require a more comprehensive range of interventions which can tackle abuse, neglect, low educational attainment, poor parenting, damaged relationships, troublesome peers, substance misuse, poor problem solving, violent or aggressive tendencies, as well as unemployment and a lack of suitable housing.

And at Nacro we know what works when it comes to tackling the more persistent cases of youth offending.

Risk-based interventions

It is now a well established rule that, the higher the likelihood of reoffending, the greater the need to intervene. Programmes fail because they simply don't do enough to tackle the many and varied problems associated with many young people's offending. Others fail because they try and do too much. Matching the amount of intervention with the level of risk is crucial to making solid progress.

Tackling crime-related problems

Young people who offend have all sorts of problems. Not all these problems lead to reoffending but some will. And unless programmes directly address these issues, the cycle of offending won't be broken.

Beyond the brink

Building positive relationships

For all the talk of punishment and coercion, effective programmes rely on the quality of the relationship between the staff working on them and the young person taking part. So much hinges on the relentless patience of someone believing in the offender and motivating them to change, rather than just giving up on them.

Building community ties

Rebuilding ties with family, friends and the wider community and developing relationships that do not centre around crime makes young people far less likely to reoffend. Young people who feel they have a stake in their community are less likely to commit an offence in it than those who don't. This makes work with family, friends and the wider community (eg, employers, community groups and the voluntary sector) as well as with the young person all the more important, and this is where payback programmes come into their own.

Building a sense of responsibility

Whatever the political arguments for and against prison, it is beyond doubt that it strips young people of any sense of responsibility, as well as taking away any sense of control and instilling a negative outlook on the future. For interventions to work they must help young people take control of their own destiny and build their motivation and confidence to do well.

Knowing what works is not enough though. We know what works with some young people some of the time. But interventions which work well in some situations work less well in others and promising pilots do not always produce the same results when rolled out on a larger scale.

The next big challenge, therefore, is to discover what works across large geographical areas with large volumes of offenders, and to have an impact on the small but significant number of young people who continually commit crime and end up in custody over and over again.

Payment by results offers an opportunity for new thinking, with a rich landscape of new providers getting involved and developing new ideas and new models for preventing youth crime and reducing reoffending, based on what works.

Nacro is gearing up to play a leading part in this bright new world of opportunity.

To find out more, visit nacro.org.uk



Nacro, Park Place, 10-12 Lawn Lane, London SW8 1UD

www.nacro.org.uk

Registered charity 226171