HM Inspectorate
of Probation

Evidence-based core messages for youth justice

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HM Inspectorate of Probation
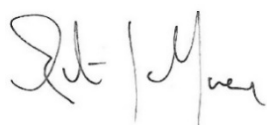
Academic Insights 2023/09

OCTOBER 2023

Contents

Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Professor Ursula Kilkelly, identifying ten key messages from the research literature for an evidence-based approach to youth justice policy and practice. As is recognised, there is a need to blend key findings and insights from a range of disciplines and types of research, as well as from across jurisdictions; we should never expect to find all the evidence by looking too narrowly in one place. Nevertheless, there are some remarkably clear and consistent messages emanating from the research literature. Young people who come into conflict with the law tend to have multiple needs, with adversities located at the individual, family and community levels. It is clear that one-size-fits-all approaches do not work, and that an individualised, rights-based and child-centred approach is required, treating each young person in line with their age, development and specific needs. Attention should be given to establishing positive, supportive, respectful and trusting relationships – with a focus on the voice of the child – and to both the immediate and longer-term supports which are required to facilitate positive pro-social development and social inclusion.

The paper also recognises the need for the evidence base to continually evolve and to bridge the gap between research, policy and practice. Within the inspectorate, we will continue to collaborate with academics and external researchers in numerous ways – looking to utilise and maximise the knowledge, experience and skills across the research community – and we will use all evidence to develop our inspection programmes and to consider system-wide change that could change children's lives for the better.

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Ursula Kilkelly is a professor of law at University College Cork where she researches and teaches international youth justice and children's rights. She has published multiple monographs, edited collections and peer reviewed articles in this field, undertaking commissioned research and receiving research grants from international, European and Irish bodies. The work on which this publication is largely based was the subject of an inter-disciplinary grant, awarded to Ursula and colleagues at University College Cork by the Irish Research Council, funded by the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth in 2020. This work was developed further and published by Palgrave in 2023 as Kilkelly, Forde, Lambert and Swirak, 'Children in Conflict with the law: Rights, Research and Progressive Youth Justice'.

1. Introduction

Research in youth justice is vast and varied, meaning that those seeking to identify 'good practice' or 'evidence' must navigate multiple studies, large and small, from every jurisdiction and academic discipline. The scholarship has been produced using diverse methodologies and approaches, and although there is an increasing focus on policy impact and practitioner perspectives, its breadth and depth can make this vast literature difficult to access by those interested in an evidence-based approach.

The aim of this paper is to identify, from the established research literature, the key messages relating to children who come into conflict with the law and their pathways into and out of the justice system. Building on previous research funded by the Irish Research Council (Kilkelly et al., 2021) and since updated in a work that seeks to align the scholarship with a children's rights approach (Kilkelly et al., 2023), this paper identifies ten key messages that should inform an evidence-based approach to youth justice in any jurisdiction.

1. Adversity	Young people who come into conflict with the law have experienced adversity on an individual, family and community basis, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds experience disproportionate contact with the justice system.
2. Adolescent development	Offending behaviour by young people should be viewed as part of adolescent development and considered in the context of the young person's social and psychological environment.
3. Universal services	Providing access to universal services – especially those focused on education and health – can prevent young people coming into conflict with the law.
4. Individualisation	An individualised, rights-based and child-centred approach is key to preventing young people from getting into further conflict with the law.
5. Diversion	When seeking to divert young people who have come into conflict with the law, it is important to take care with how and when to intervene, always ensuring to support positive outcomes.
6. Positive relationships	The development of positive relationships between young people and adults can help to prevent offending/engaging in further offending.
7. Detention	The use of detention must be avoided, and where used, it must be adapted to children's needs, with a focus on equipping children with the health, education and life skills that ensure their safe return to their communities.
8. Continuing support	Education and employment opportunities are vital to ensuring young people avoid further offending and attention needs to be paid to managing the end of any intervention, providing continuity in supports to the greatest extent possible.
9. Involving young people	Young people's lived experiences are invaluable for policymakers seeking to understand the nature of youth offending, and their views are indispensable for developing effective and child-centred responses to offending behaviour.
10. Developing the evidence base	There is a continued need for consistent data collection, increased funded research, and improved relationships between policymakers and the academic community in order to promote progressive approaches to youth justice.

2. Ten key messages from youth justice research

1. Young people who come into conflict with the law have experienced adversity on an individual, family and community basis, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds experience disproportionate contact with the justice system

Young people who come into conflict with the law frequently have complex, multiple unmet needs (Kilkelly et al. 2023; Case and Browning, 2021). No one factor explains their involvement in offending and the relationship between the different factors and their offending behaviour is complex. Young people who face challenges or circumstances associated with offending often do so in multiple domains, with individual factors overlapping with broader issues in family and community environments (Junger-Tas et al., 2015; Farrington, 2015; Jolliffe et al., 2017).

Experiences of loss, bereavement (Boswell, 1998) and trauma (Yohros, 2022) feature large in the lives of many young people who come into conflict with the law (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Finkelhor, 2011; see also Academic Insights paper 2023/08 by Evans et al.). They frequently have poor health, with a complex relationship between poor mental health, substance misuse and offending behaviour (Graves et al., 2007; Fanti et al., 2019; Jolliffe et al., 2017). Poor engagement with school, including as a result of undiagnosed disabilities, experience of bullying, and school exclusion are important factors (McCrystal et al., 2007; McAra and McVie, 2022).

Young people in the justice system have often experienced state care (Gerard et al., 2019; McFarlane, 2018; Smith and McVie, 2003) while young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are also over-represented in the justice system (Abrams et al., 2021; Goldson et al., 2021; van den Brink et al., 2022).

Young people in conflict with the law are frequently found to have grown up in less stable family environments, where family conflict, trauma or violence is present (Manly et al., 2013; McAra and McVie, 2010). Communities in which young people grow up may also be relevant here, and access to resources of various kinds is important in preventing contact with the justice system (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

2. Offending behaviour by young people should be viewed as part of adolescent development and considered in the context of the young person's social and psychological environment

The age-crime curve posits that offending behaviour peaks during the teenage years after which most young people grow out of offending (Farrington, 1986; Loeber et al., 2012). Similarly, sensation-seeking tendencies increase among adolescents after puberty and remain high into the early 20s after which they begin to decline (Duell et al., 2018). The relationship between brain development and a young person's behaviour is very important in understanding this phase of child development (Steinberg, 2017). In particular, it is relevant that the part of the brain associated with emotional regulation, executive functioning and decision-making does not fully mature until early adulthood (Steinberg et al., 2018). This combination of high risk-taking and under-developed self-regulation, impulsivity and self-control can create a link with, and provides important context to young people's offending behaviour (McAra and McVie, 2010; Cohen, 2016).

Just as the amount or intensity of risk-taking behaviour by young people is informed by the context (Leather, 2009), individual development must also be situated within the young person's

wider environment, including cultural, political, economic and social factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Offending behaviour by young people must thus always be considered against the backdrop of child development, while viewed within its wider social context.

3. Providing access to universal services – especially those focused on education and health – can prevent young people coming into conflict with the law.

It is vital that approaches to offending behaviour – prevention and diversion – seek to address young people's basic needs, including education and health, as this can have significant benefits, including preventing them from coming into conflict with the law. In order to avoid stigmatisation and to maximise the strengths of this approach, prevention strategies must focus on ensuring that children and their families have access to supports and services on a universal basis, and comprehensive early childhood and family supports should be in place (Kelly, 2012). An accumulation of protective factors increases young people's resilience and helps to prevent them coming into conflict with the law (Hartman et al., 2009; Kilkelly et al., 2023; see also Academic Insights paper 2022/04 by Chard).

Positive early intervention programmes include those that provide opportunities for social interaction (Kelly, 2012) and which provide family support (Haydon, 2014). School can be an important site for prevention efforts, and inclusive, supportive school environments with positive teacher relationships, can act as protective factors (Jolliffe et al., 2016; Savage and Ellis, 2018; Seddig and Reinecke, 2017; Theiman, 2015). The promotion of social inclusion through access to community and state services, education and employment opportunities, and leisure activities are also vital. There is a clear need for children's services to connect and co-ordinate so that resources are available to young people in a timely way, when they need them (Mullis et al., 2005).

The family can be a protective environment to prevent young people from coming into conflict with the law (Farrington et al., 2016) and positive parental attachment and supportive parents are important factors in this respect (Hill et al., 2018; Svensson et al., 2017). Peer association can be similarly protective, when friendships help young people avoid pathways into drug use and crime. (Maclure and Sotelo, 2014).

Access to universal services thus prevents young people coming into conflict with the law; it also has the added effect of protecting the young person from the harms associated with contact with the justice system (Kilkelly et al., 2023).

4. An individualised, rights-based and child-centred approach is key to preventing young people from getting into further conflict with the law

Notwithstanding the common themes present among young people in conflict with the law, each young person's life experience is individual to them, making it important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Adopting a child-centred or a 'child first' approach by treating each young person in line with their age and development is key (Case and Browning, 2021). Addressing young people's wellbeing holistically so that their sense of 'mattering' is increased can contribute to the reduction of violence (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022).

The importance of the individualised approach is highlighted by the fact that it can be difficult to identify the reasons why some young people go on to become involved in serious or persistent forms of offending, while others do not. While desistance is often linked to a natural process of maturation and may be linked to key transition points and critical moments in young people's lives (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Rocque, 2015), interventions should take an individualised approach and aim to meet young people's needs,

enable protective factors, and recognise and develop individual strengths (Belciug et al., 2016; Viera et al., 2009; Vitopoulos et al., 2012).

An approach that takes account of the child's right to participate in decisions that affect them can be linked to preventing a young person from getting deeper into the justice system (Kilkelly et al., 2021; Kilkelly et al., 2023). Just as the absence of meaningful youth voice can shape young people's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion, impacting on the likelihood of their involvement in offending behaviour (Nicholas, 2017), fostering greater social inclusion, including through youth participation in their communities, can help to create a place where young people feel they belong (Deuchar, 2009; Magson et al., 2016).

5. When seeking to divert young people who have come into conflict with the law, it is important to take care with how and when to intervene, always ensuring to support positive outcomes

Diversion is key to helping young people move away from offending behaviour and avoid contact with the justice system. Approaches should always favour minimum intervention and maximum diversion (McAra and McVie, 2007; Corr, 2014; Wilson and Hoge, 2013).

Diversionary strategies can take a number of forms, but those that have shown positive results include family-based programmes (Schwalbe et al., 2012, p. 30; Jeong et al., 2014) and those that develop positive relationships between young people and mentors or facilitators (Seroczynski, 2016; Belciug et al., 2016). Research has shown that therapeutic (Belciug et al., 2016) or rehabilitative approaches can also produce positive results. Schemes that develop the resilience of young people and their families are especially effective in facilitating desistance at critical moments in early teenage years (Bateman, 2012; Wilson and Hoge, 2013; NeMoyer et al., 2019).

Key moments that offer opportunities for the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities and that interrupt habitual ways of acting are important to support desistance from offending. For example, programmes and interventions that focus on building young people's strengths and competencies have shown positive results (Belciug et al., 2016, p. 933), along with those that take an individualised and holistic approach (MacGabhann et al., 2004; Wylie et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2007). Other approaches that may be effective include programmes that engage the young person and their family, and help facilitate access to multiple services (Bagvlio et al., 2017; Stout et al., 2017). Provision of supports to young people to facilitate programme completion can be important in helping young people to succeed in programmes and interventions (Kretschmar et al., 2018).

Finally, specific interventions may be needed for specific cohorts of young people, including:

- girls (Veysey et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2016)
- those in marginalised and particularly vulnerable groups (Hammersley, 2011)
- those who engage in serious or violent offending (Caldwell and Van Rybroek, 2005; see also Academic Insights paper 2021/13 by Gray, Smithson and Jump).

Notwithstanding the value of diversionary approaches, care needs to be taken with the development and implementation of such strategies given that targeted early intervention programmes may stigmatise already vulnerable young people and draw them further into the justice system (Kelly, 2012). System contact can lead to damaging long-term effects (McAra and McVie, 2007), highlighting the importance of ensuring that every intervention – even one that aims to divert the young person from the justice system – is not only proportionate, but appropriate and necessary.

6. The development of positive relationships between young people and adults can help to prevent offending/engaging in further offending behaviour

Positive relationships between adults and young people must be central to efforts to avoid young people having contact with the justice system. Strong relationships are significant protective factors; positive relationships with parents (Farrington, 2015; Hill et al., 2018), teachers (Theimann, 2015), and relationships with positive peers (Bors and Reinecke, 2010) can all support young people to avoid further offending. Diversionary programmes based on the development of positive relationships with adults – whether mentors or facilitators – have shown positive results (Seroczynski, 2016; Belciug et al., 2016). The importance of positive relationships between youth justice practitioners and young people is also very important (Drake et al., 2014; Harland and McCready, 2014), including in the probation (Gunay and Bacon, 2020) and detention (Kilkelly and Bergin, 2022) settings.

Young people's negative interactions with adults – particularly with police officers and other professionals within the justice system – can result in breaches of their rights (Feld, 2013), as well as diminished acceptance of the legitimacy of their authority (Hinds 2007). Conversely, justice professionals can facilitate better communication and understanding with young people where their interactions are based on mutual respect and trust (Lount et al., 2018). Support from adults can play an important role in helping young people to access their procedural rights, providing important emotional and legal assistance during the criminal process (Broeking and Peterson-Badali, 2010; Forde and Kilkelly, 2023).

7. The use of detention must be avoided, and where used, it must be adapted to children's needs, with a focus on equipping children with the health, education and life skills that ensure their safe return to their communities

It is widely accepted that depriving children of their liberty is not in their interests and frequently leads to widespread breaches of their rights (Nowak, 2019). This has given rise to the international legal principle that detention should be a measure of last resort (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; see also Academic Insights paper 2019/04 by Goldson and Academic Insights paper 2022/05 by Forde). Placing young people in adult facilities, or alongside adults, is particularly harmful to their development and places them at risk of violence and ill-treatment (Nowak, 2019; Cox, 2017).

Apart from the basic requirement to protect young people from harm and ensure regular contact with their families (Kilkelly and Casale, 2012), provision of healthcare and education services are especially important for young people in detention. Young people themselves have highlighted the importance of appropriate education and vocational training (Nowak, 2019) while equally, detention can be associated with positive health outcomes where quality care is provided and it is sustained after release (Nowak, 2019).

Ensuring that young people in detention receive care and education that meets their needs requires an explicit child-focused approach, delivered by specialist staff and provided through dedicated resources, law and policy frameworks with a robust, independent inspection regime (Kilkelly and Bergin, 2022).

8. Education and employment opportunities are vital to ensuring young people avoid further offending and attention needs to be paid to managing the end of any intervention, providing continuity in supports to the greatest extent possible

Education that meets the needs of young people can both prevent them getting into trouble in the first place, and help them to move away from offending later on. Successfully

accessing education – particularly with a focus on young people's strengths – can have short- and long-term benefits for supporting young people to move away from offending behaviour (Abeling-Judge, 2019), whereas the lack of such basic services and opportunities can have the opposite effect (Mullis et al., 2005; Gormally, 2014, p. 160). An emphasis on educational inclusion and lifelong learning to support secure employment is key (McAra and McVie, 2022).

However, addressing educational needs may be insufficient, taken in isolation, and in this respect, ensuring greater opportunities for those at risk of social exclusion and increasing the role of families in supporting learning in the early years are equally important factors (Sabates, 2008). Supports for young people, particularly around mental health difficulties, substance use, and adverse childhood experiences, can also be important to reduce the possibility of reoffending (Hammersley, 2011; Hoeve et al., 2013; Robst, 2015).

It is important to ensure that young people enjoy ongoing access to supports when the youth justice intervention ends (Myers, 2013). Successful reintegration can be heavily dependent on support in relation to:

- employment (Rajah et al., 2014)

- further education/training (Chung et al., 2007)

- accommodation (Myers, 2013)

- accessing mainstream children/youth services (Gray, 2011).

Ensuring that these rights are in place following an intervention is crucial, particularly for young people who have been in detention and are returning to their communities (Rajah et al., 2014). Progress made in detention can be difficult to sustain where there is a lack of meaningful supports for young people who return home (Myers, 2013); in this respect, aftercare placements (Gray, 2011) and close supervision (Dempsey et al., 2021) are especially important.

9. Young people's lived experiences are invaluable for policymakers seeking to understand the nature of youth offending, and their views are indispensable for developing effective and child-centred responses to offending behaviour

Perhaps in light of the fact that youth justice has been largely 'done' to young people rather than 'with' young people (Case and Haines, 2014), commitment to involving young people in the review of youth justice law, policy and programmes is only just emerging (Smithson and Jones, 2021; see also Academic Insights paper 2021/10 by Smithson and Gray). At the same time, significant merit is beginning to attach to the need to involve young people in the design and review of youth justice policies and services (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012; Creaney, 2014). Although the input of young people into processes of policy making and service evaluation remains underdeveloped, the importance of young person's participation is increasingly understood (Belciug et al., 2016).

Apart from their legal right to have their views taken into account in matters that affect them, under article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people can provide valuable insights and perspectives that would not otherwise be articulated or considered as part of the wider understanding of the youth justice process (Kilkelly et al., 2021). Taking their experiences into account in the evaluation of youth justice programmes or strategies can yield significant benefits both for policymakers and for young people themselves (Creaney, 2014). In some instances, the input of young people can serve to reinforce existing findings; in others, they can present diametrically opposed views to those presented by the adults in the study (Forde and Kilkelly, 2023), helping to sharpen the child's perspective. Meaningful participation of young people in youth justice research can

help to address the power imbalance in such processes, while offering significant potential for change (Smithson and Jones, 2020). Building on the rights-based approach to youth justice, involving young people in the research process, just like in policy and system reviews, demonstrates how children's rights can be respected, in and through youth justice research (Pleysier and Kilkelly, 2023).

Moving beyond the approach where the adults set the agenda and by allowing young people into their process of review or evaluation, opportunities to co-create or share spaces with young people are beginning to appear (Smithson and Jones, 2021). A rights-based and child-centred youth justice process will only truly emerge, however, where the voices of young people are given due weight (Case et al., 2020).

10. There is a continued need for consistent data collection, increased funded research, and improved relationships between policymakers and the academic community in order to promote progressive approaches to youth justice

While an extensive body of literature has helped to deepen our understanding of key issues relating to youth justice, clear gaps remain. A significant issue remains the experiences of minority groups including:

- those from ethnic minority backgrounds
- girls
- LGBTI+ young people
- those with disabilities
- those who have experience of state care.

Given the extent of disproportionate minority contact worldwide (Smith and McVie, 2003; McFarlane, 2018; Gerard et al., 2019; Abrams et al. 2021; Bishop 2005, Goldson et al. 2021; Lynch and Liefaard 2020; van den Brink et al. 2022), these experiences are particularly important to explore. The implications of intersectionality are vitally important in this context (see Academic Insights paper 2022/06 by Davis).

Data collection remains problematic, despite some improvements. The lack of consistent approaches in recording and sharing data, across all justice, health and education agencies, clouds the true picture of how any system is being implemented and, more importantly, how it is being experienced by young people themselves. Comparisons, including across jurisdictions, or evaluations are challenging, if not impossible.

Longitudinal studies still remain relatively rare, especially those that track young people's lives before, during and after their contact with the justice system and in this respect, funding for large inter-disciplinary studies should be a priority. Ensuring that these steps are taken is crucial to ensure that our knowledge- and evidence-base about youth justice and young people in conflict with the law continues to develop. This is not only essential for the development of progressive, evidence-based law and policies into the future, but is also necessary to identify and understand new and emerging issues that need to be addressed. Importantly, this process should involve the participation of young people who have lived justice experience.

Finally, it is important to consider more effective and meaningful ways to bridge the gap between youth justice scholarship and its policy and practice so that the respective learning can be shared to mutual benefit in both directions. Academic partnerships and networks, at national and international levels, are vital to ensure experience, knowledge and expertise is shared. Young people, especially with justice experience, must also become partners in this process. Only then will rights – and evidence-based youth justice – emerge.

3. Conclusion

The extensive international scholarship on young people who come into conflict with the law and their experiences of the justice system is diverse and dense, comprising large and small multi-method studies that cross jurisdictions and disciplines. Despite these many variables, the messages that emanate from this body of knowledge are remarkably clear and consistent. They remind us repeatedly that young people who come into conflict with the law are disadvantaged in multiple complex ways by individual, family and community circumstances. Disproportionate impact and inequitable outcomes are widespread. The key messages from the literature remind us too that justice systems in which most of these young people find themselves often do a poor job addressing their needs and particular circumstances. They have also, so far at least, done a relatively poor job engaging with the young people as to their experiences of that system, with academics, policymakers and practitioners too far apart in trying to narrow this gap.

In presenting these high-level findings from the world's leading studies, this paper advocates for a more empathic approach to young people who come into conflict with the law. In setting out the evidence underpinning the key messages, the paper supports an approach to offending behaviour by young people that treats them as children, rights holders, with all their individual life experiences and vulnerabilities. Regard must be had to their continuing development both as important context for their offending behaviour and the key to their future.

In conclusion, this paper highlights how the ultimate goal of any youth justice system can be achieved, that is to ensure young people not only enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, but that they reach adulthood and beyond, as happy and healthy adults, supported to play their part in society. It also seeks to promote an approach to evidence-based policymaking as a collaborative endeavour, one that is shared between academia and decision-makers in youth justice practice and policy, with a focus on the young people at the heart of this process.

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