

BOOK REVIEW BY SALLY RAMAGE

“PERSISTENT YOUNG OFFENDERS

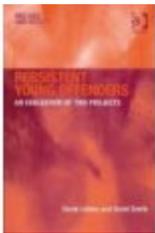
AN EVALUATION OF TWO PROJECTS”

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This is a new criminological book in Ashgate’s Welfare and Society series. This book was written as a result of the study of two projects in Scotland which were set up and commissioned by the Scottish Executive. It is to be noted that a persistent young offender is a term defined as “*a young person aged 10-17 years who has been sentenced by any criminal court in the UK on three or more occasions for one or more recordable offences and within three years of the last sentencing occasion is subsequently arrested or has an information laid against him for further recordable offence*”, according to a 1997 Home Office Consultation Paper titled “Tackling Delays in the Youth Justice System”.

This book was written because it was decided that these evaluations, commissioned by an official body, affect the broader community as well as the academic community and therefore deserve to be more widely read. As such, it contributes to the understanding of what is needed to work successfully with young offenders. Broadly the book concludes that it is important to work with persistent young offenders in a patient, consistent, understanding and resilient way, relying on skilled and experienced workers.

The two projects related in the book are titled CUETEN and FREGARRACH. CUETEN was located in GLENROTHES in FIFE and FREGARRACH was located in POLMONT and ALLOA.

There are 8 chapters, namely:

1. The Establishment of the Projects.
2. CueTen at Work.
3. Freagarrach at Work.
4. The Young People at the Projects.
5. Perceptions and Expectations of the Projects.
6. The Effectiveness of the Projects.

7. Costs and Benefits.
8. An Overall Evaluation of the Projects.

‘Chapter 1 describes and analyses the establishment of Freagarrach and CueTen. It notes the policy context which enables them to come into existence, and the important differences in the local circumstances in which they began to work, Freagarrach being seen as an organic development of an existing local strategy, CueTen as a new and largely unheralded stranger whose arrival was met with suspicion in some quarters.

Chapter 2 describes the work of CueTen, in theory and practice, showing that the innovative aims and methods which had been a main part of its appeal to the Scottish Office were difficult to implement in practice.

Chapter 3 similarly describes the work of Freagarrach, showing how the project benefited from its embeddings in a range of local services and from high-level support in local agencies. It discusses the day to day work of the project staff, and suggests that while their approach was certainly in line with the best available evidence about “what works” it was also crucially informed by relationships with the young people that conveyed care and respect as well as setting firm limits on what counted as acceptable behaviour.

Chapter 4 presents the characteristics of the young people who attended the projects. Both CueTen and Freagarrach largely succeeded in working with their intended target groups of the most persistent juvenile offenders in their areas. CueTen worked mainly with 15 year-olds, Freagarrach with a wider age range, but mainly from 14 to 16. Very few were attending school in any meaningful sense. As with all populations of known persistent offenders, the great majority were male, and many had experienced deprivation, loss and abuse in their family lives, and were enmeshed in subcultures of delinquency and substance misuse.

Chapter 5 discusses how the projects were perceived by the young people who attended them and by social workers and other staff in the juvenile justice system. While the young people and (when we could obtain their views) their relatives spoke positively about their experience of the projects, the chapter stresses the importance of the organisational context in which they worked, and the continuing difficulties faced by CueTen as a result of the circumstances of the project’s establishment.

Chapter 6 turns to the question of the projects’ effectiveness, defined primarily as their impact on the young people’s rate and seriousness of offending, but also in terms of effects on the use of secure residential care and custody. It was rare for young people who attended the projects to stop offending entirely, but this is not surprising, giving the volume and intensity of their offending before they started at the projects.

Chapter 7 examines the costs of the projects and sets these against the benefits they produced in reduced rates of offending and reduced demand for other resources.

Chapter 8 draws together themes from the earlier chapters to provide an overall evaluation of the two projects, and argues that the success of Freagarrach also counts as a success for the principles of welfare and voluntarism that have underpinned the Children's Hearing System.' (The Children's Hearings System is the care and justice system for children in Scotland. A child can be referred to the Children's Reporter by any concerned person if they are in need of compulsory measures of supervision for their care, protection, behaviour or they are alleged to have committed an offence. A small number of children are repeatedly referred to the Reporter for alleged offending behaviour).

The revelations of such projects as this book relates are that projects must be established very carefully, considering especially the kind of information the project requires. Such projects require a very high level of support. Such projects must be devised with the ability to change in size and/or objectives as information gathered will reveal and must have a good mix of academic expertise as well as practical personnel. As these projects reveal, sometimes, theory is over-ambitious and far away from reality and I think that the most important conclusions to come out of these two projects are:

1. Preparation work is the vital element of any project.
2. Foundation work needs to be undertaken with utmost care and detailed documentation in order to enable a successful and thorough evaluation at the end of such projects. Cost/benefit analysis can be performed as anticipated and finally as was and this can reveal more effectively, the success of such projects.
3. Flood et al's analysis of the 1998/99 Youth Lifestyles Survey revealed a relationship between the type of area lived in and persistent and serious offending. Twice the proportion of men aged 12-30 living in inner-city areas were persistent or serious offenders as in rural areas. This finding was not fully made use of in these two projects. The Freagarrach project took place in the smallest local authority in mainland Scotland, population 49,000 whilst the CueTen project took place in Fife, an area of 350,000 populations in a post-war new town. It therefore seems on the face of it that these two projects are only of value in examining the minority of persistent young offenders, rather than the majority. Neither did these two projects address gender as did S. Campbell and V. Harrington, in their 2000 study titled "Youth Crime: Findings from the 1998/99 Youth Lifestyles Survey" commissioned by the Home Office. United Kingdom official welfare and social evaluations are much more loosely based than such evaluation in the United States, for example, and can benefit from comparative studies and I will give a flavour of some US projects - A recent US evaluation into the credibility of children was performed to understand the role of race in perceptions of child credibility by getting children from 3 racial backgrounds to participate in play and interviewed about their experience later on video-tape. Academic study states that adults' credibility judgements is comprised of a number of dimensions including suggestibility, honesty, believability, truthfulness, accuracy, consistency and intelligence. The evaluation was precisely designed for this child evaluation including the use of statistical tests. Such tests are reviewed for intellectual

merit, innovation and integration before the project commences, rather than midstream of the project. Pilot studies are undertaken. Literature reviews are undertaken and documented before commencement of the evaluation. There are evaluations on juveniles undertaken in other countries.

4. The Freagarrach project is the more interesting of the two as its main focus was on offending, using the cognitive- behavioural approach.

In Scotland, there have been key findings is that the number of persistent young offenders rose year on year; by 5% between 2003-04 and 2004-05 and by 10% between 2004-05 and 2005-06. There was a higher percentage increase in the number of girls than boys over the three years, a rise of 14% in each year for girls. Girls continued to be a minority (14% to 16%) of persistent young offenders. The most common age for a child to be identified as a persistent young offender in each of the three years was 15 years. On 11 July 2007 the Scottish Executive announced that the national target, to reduce the numbers of persistent young offenders by 10%, had been reviewed and it had been decided that it should not be the primary measure of Government or agencies' performance. A new set of measures are to be developed. There were increases in the number of children aged 14 years and over who were identified as persistent young offenders across the three years. There was also an increase in the number of 12 year old boys. The number of 13 year olds and children aged 11 years and under either remained constant or decreased. It would have been useful if David Lobley and David Smith had tied up these government findings for Scotland with their findings in these two projects.

There is research evidence on juveniles by Cooper 1997; Grisso 1981; O'Connor 1990; Peterson-Badall and Abramovich 1992; Peterson-Badali, Abramovitch and Duda 1997; Redlich, Silverman and Steiner 2003; Savitsky and Karras 1984; Smith 1985; Warren-Leubacker, Tate, Hilton and Ozbek 1989. Ignoring such research is a set-back to UK solutions to the problems of persistent young offenders.

Nevertheless, this piece of important work has been well documented and can be viewed as a launch pad for attempts to cure such persistent juvenile offenders in parts of Scotland. By setting out a successful project alongside another which was not as successful, lessons can be drawn.

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