

# *The Mental Health Needs of Young Offenders*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2000 the Mental Health Foundation established a vulnerable young people project to explore the mental health needs of four key groups of young people identified as being at risk of developing mental health difficulties. These being young offenders, children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, looked after children and homeless young people. This project forms part of the Mental Health Foundation's ongoing programme of work on children and young people's mental health

Research on current policy and practice with respect to the mental health needs of each group was commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation. The focus of the research was on England but the issues and findings will be relevant to interested parties across the UK. Full reports have been prepared for each group and issued for consultation. A combined final report will be published in the spring of 2003.

This update reports on a research carried out by the Policy Research Bureau, commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation, on a review of existing research literature on the mental health of young offenders.

## **BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY**

The mental health needs of young offenders is not an area where there is much debate and argument. There is widespread agreement in the literature that there is still a scarcity of research data on the precise nature and prevalence of mental health disorders among young people caught up in the criminal justice system. However, the topic has recently received much more attention. There is also considerable agreement that levels of psychosocial and psychiatric problems among young people at any stage of the criminal justice system are higher than in the general population. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that both in the UK and USA, mental health services provided for young people in custody are inadequate.

The literature review presented here involved systematic searches of literature for information regarding the mental health needs of young offenders. This included articles, books and reports concerned with forensic and adolescent psychiatry, mental health and social services. The searches mainly concentrated on studies from the US and UK carried out in the last three decades.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Why are young offenders at higher risk of mental health problems

Young offenders are at risk of having higher than usual rates of mental health problems for three main reasons:

- Because the original risk factors that led to their offending also predict, in the general population, to mental health problems. These factors include inconsistent or erratic parenting, over-harsh discipline, hyperactivity as a child, and various other types of stressors on families and neighbourhoods.
- Because various aspects of offending itself may cause mental health problems. The characteristically risky behaviour of young offenders may itself cause stresses.
- Because interactions with the criminal justice system are stressful and may on their own lead to anxiety and depression, particularly those associated with custody.

With this array of poor backgrounds, restricted opportunities, stressful life experiences and, in extreme cases, withdrawal of liberty, it is not surprising that the more persistent or serious young offenders are likely to be a disaffected and angry group. Some will become detached from 'usual' adolescent life course and, with no prospects of employment or other socially accepted ways of paying their way, they run an increased risk of being homeless and rootless.

In some cases their behaviour and mood could be construed as a reasonable response to the situations in which they find themselves and even a type of coping mechanism. While we can design individual treatment programmes, we also at some level need to address the underlying social and personal causes of their multiple needs such as family breakdown and poverty.

How these young people are defined and treated by society is an important part of the equation, and social exclusion is an underlying theme, particularly for the 16-18 age group.

### Evidence relating to the overlap between mental health problems and youth offending

- Rates of mental health problems in the general population of adolescents has been estimated at 13% for girls and 10% for boys (11-15 years).
- Research suggests that prevalence of mental health problems for young people in contact with the criminal justice system range from 25 to 81%, being highest for those in custody.
- Figures in the literature indicate the rates of mental health problems to be at least three times as high for those within the criminal justice system as within the general population.
- The most common disorders for both the normal population and the population of young offenders are conduct disorders, emotional disorders and attentional disorders. Substance misuse is also a particular problem.
- Research suggests the detection of mental health problems in young offender populations is imprecise, and tends towards underestimation, particularly of internalising disorders.

**Current status of services for young offenders with mental health problems**

The research literature in relation to mental health services for this group suggests that:

- Overall (with some exceptions), the mental health needs of young offenders are clearly not being met by existing services within England and probably across the UK.
- Expertise and resources are lacking within custody in particular, but also in other types of provision across all the agencies involved (social services, youth justice and probation).
- There are problems in providing specialist services within the youth justice system, but also with referring young people out to existing services in general CAMHS.

**What happens to young offenders if they do not get services?**

- Further offending and worsening mental health problems. The two are interlinked. While the offending may have been a risk factor for mental health problems in the first place, it has long been understood that mental health problems in turn go on to be a risk factor for continued offending<sup>1</sup>.
- Early detection may reduce the likelihood that young offenders will persist into adulthood.
- Having a disorder as a child or young person also predicts to more chronic disorder in adulthood.
- Having unmet mental health problems in custody is likely to both increase chances of being bullied, and also make young people more likely to self-injure or attempt suicide, quite apart from being a contravention of their rights under the new human rights legislation.

Meeting young offenders mental health needs is critical if youth offending is to be properly addressed.

**KEY ISSUES**

A number of crosscutting issues arose as a result of this review and the problems faced in practice.

- There is a particular issue of attitude to treatment amongst young people in the criminal justice system with more severe psychiatric disorders. Non-compliance, substance abuse and recidivism are common in this group.
- Ethnicity is an issue in various different ways. Young people from ethnic minorities are over-represented in custody<sup>2</sup>.
- Gender should always be considered with respect to antisocial behaviour and offending because of the different rates of antisocial behaviour attributable to young men and young women.
- There is the issue of the relationship of mental health problems to physical health problems.

- Relationships between practitioners and the young people they are dealing are of critical importance in the delivery of mental health services to this group.
- The state of knowledge is not sufficiently good to allow absolute certainty about how to meet the needs of these young people.
- The issue of resources raises its head at every turn, both in terms of payment for services, and responsibility for providing treatment in the first place.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people who offend are much more likely to have mental health problems; these problems are likely to be similar to those of the general adolescent population but 'more so' (conduct disorder, emotional disturbance, hyperactivity and attentional problems). Problems arise in inadequate screening and assessment, lack of staff training, insufficient funding, limited treatment options and a lack of research. Meeting these needs is a multi-agency responsibility requiring shifts of understanding and increased communication between key players.

The full report states that changes to the present situation need to be considered in the context of the development of services to children generally, and of ongoing work in CAMHS in particular. A series of recommendations for action are presented in the full report covering policy development, partnership working and specific agencies such as youth justice and social services.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Kandel D, Kessler R and Margulies RS (1978) *Antecedents of adolescent initiation into stages of drug use: a developmental analysis*. Journal of Youth and Adolescence 7, 13-40; Rutter M, Giller H and Hagell A (1998) *Antisocial Behavior by Young People* New York: Cambridge University Press
- 2 Rutter M, Giller H and Hagell A (1998) *Antisocial Behavior by Young People* New York: Cambridge University Press

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The Mental Health Foundation is very grateful to all those supporting the Vulnerable Young People's Project in particular to The Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

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