

USER  
VOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN  
STOP RE-OFFENDING



EXCLUDED YOUTH PROJECT:  
HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER  
TO REDUCE YOUTH CRIME?

## FOREWORD

The Government is positive about young people. It wants all young people to realise their full potential and to have a say on a whole range of issues that affect them.

In December 2011 we published *Positive for Youth*, a cross-government strategy which brings together policy from at least nine different departments into a single vision for helping all young people succeed. *Positive for Youth* celebrates, promotes and supports the role and responsibility of parents, families and communities in building supportive relationships with young people. Such relationships are vital if young people are to realise their ambitions and take advantage of the opportunities they receive. *Positive for Youth* also recognises the valuable role that youth work and other services play in the lives of many young people, and sets our principles to guide future reform.

The Government alone cannot create a society that is positive for youth. Real progress depends on everyone playing their part, not least young people themselves. *Positive for Youth* itself was put together with the input of young people and youth professionals through an innovative collaborative process. The statement makes clear that young people must remain in the driving seat to inform decisions, shape provision and inspect quality.

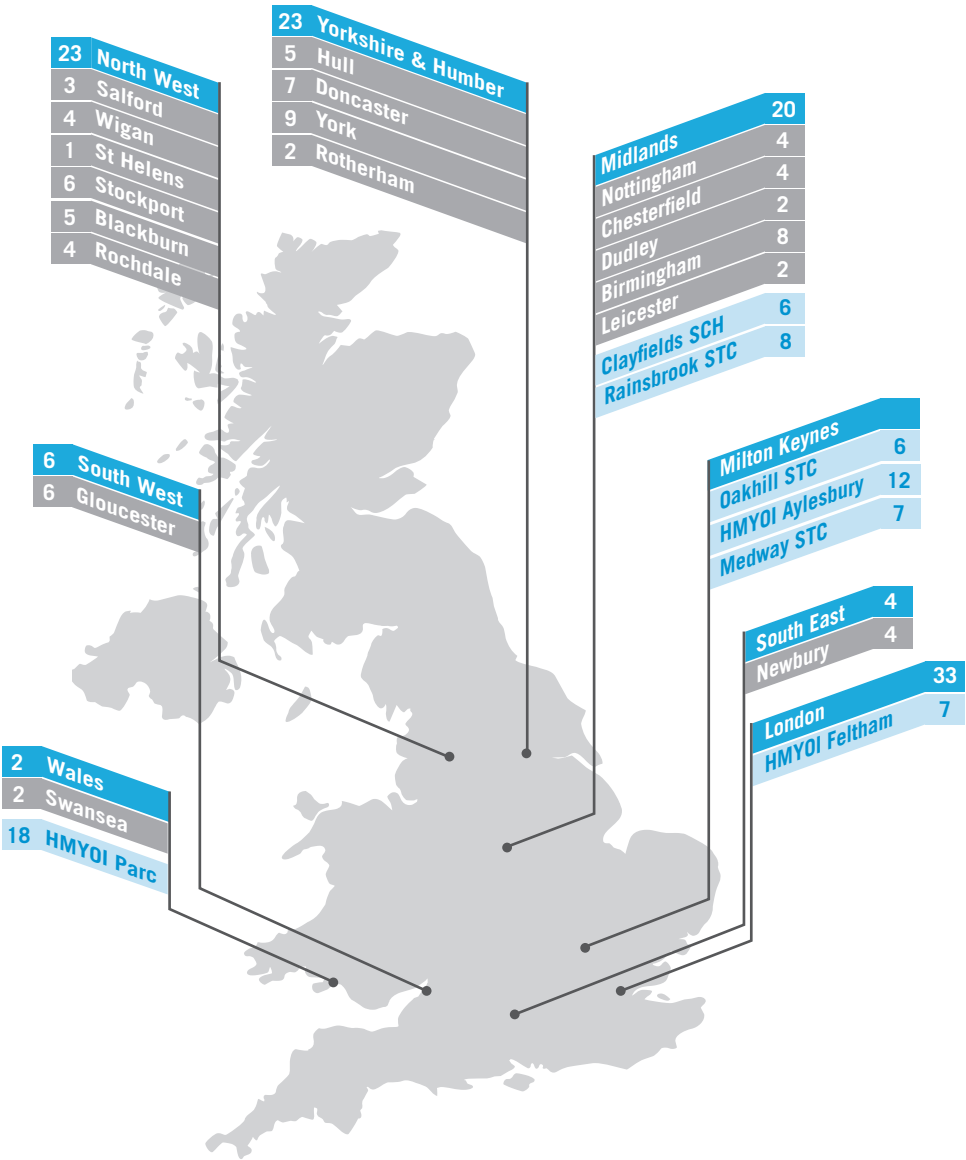
The youth justice system deals with some of the most vulnerable and challenging young people and children in our society. Working with young people to understand how that system can be improved is common sense. I've met some of these young people through User Voice and I support the Excluded Youth project. Nationwide

engagement and consultation with young offenders is an important part of the policymaking process. The workshops at the Annual Youth Justice Convention are the product of some excellent engagement and will be a significant opportunity to do some meaningful work.

**Crispin Blunt, MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Justice

What's Your Story? 2011 Engagement Sites



# WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

**“Everyone makes a mistake in their life. I shouldn't be judged for the rest of my life for mine.**

USER VOICE YOUTH REP, 17, LONDON

Since June 2011, User Voice has undertaken 36 youth-led focus groups and two case studies with 175 young people who are currently using services commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) or have previous experience of the youth justice system in England and Wales including a number of secure establishments. We have also conducted a survey completed by 740 of these young people who are between the ages of 10 and 21. So all the young people we consulted had criminal convictions.

The consultation aimed to answer three broad questions:

1. What factors do young people identify as triggering their offending behaviour and entry into the youth justice system?
2. What is the impact and experience of youth justice services from young people's perspectives? What works, what doesn't and why?
3. What could have been done to avoid them getting into trouble and what solutions can young people suggest to prevent re-offending?

The project culminated with two Open Space workshops at the Annual Youth Justice Convention in November 2011. They asked the question: How can we work together to reduce youth crime? The discussion groups included 25 young people from around the country who had been nominated by their peers from the 36 focus groups to represent them at the event, alongside policymakers and

practitioners from the youth justice system. Participants voted on what issues to discuss from career options for young offenders to peer mentoring. From this event, 10 key recommendations emerged.

The data from the questionnaires and focus groups has been analysed with the support of the University of Durham.

## Summary of the findings about the young people:

- 83% were male.
- 65% were white.
- 16.8 years was the average age.
- 87% had attended a youth offending team.
- 15% had received 10 or more sentences at court.
- Over a third had spent time in a secure establishment.
- Almost half had been to court for violent offences.
- Only 9% of the young people said that none of their friends had been in trouble with the law while 52% knew of 10 or more of their friends who had been in trouble with the law.
- 16% said they had a problem with drugs, although a large number from the focus groups regularly smoked cannabis.
- 10% thought alcohol was a problem for them, although 81% consumed alcohol.
- 47% cited money as the reason for committing crime, followed by friends (40%), alcohol (31%), family (28%), drugs (27%) and gangs (27%).
- 36% said family disapproval was more of a deterrent to re-offending than a higher chance of getting caught or higher sentences.
- 78% said the relationship with their family was good or very good.
- 55% said they did not have a role model, but 26% cited their mothers.

- 53% said their aspiration for life at age 25 was to have a 'normal' or 'good' life with a steady job, family and money. A further 20% wanted a career.
- 44% said getting a good job, or having money, or their own family (i.e. achieving their aspirations) would reduce their likelihood of re-offending.
- 72% thought the youth offending service had made at least a 'reasonable' difference to their lives, but 29% thought it had made less than a reasonable difference.

# SURVEY FINDINGS

Just under a third (31%) of the participants were interviewed in custody. Of the rest, 21% were in the North West, 19% were living in London, 13% in the Midlands, 11% in Yorkshire and Humberside, 3% in the South East, 2% in Wales and 1% in the South West.

Our sample of young people surveyed reflects the broader make up of young offenders in terms of age (our sample's average age was 16.8 years) and gender (83% were male). The tables below show the official data of young people on community orders against which we have compared our sample.

Age	Number	%
10 – 14	31,458	29
15	21,551	20
16	25,182	24
17	28,778	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,969</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Youth Justice Board statistics, 2009–10

Gender	Number	%
Male	80,038	75
Female	26,905	25
Not Known	26	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,969</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Youth Justice Board statistics, 2009–10



A total of 721 people filled in the information about ethnicity: 466 (65%) were white; 122 (17%) were black; 50 (7%) described themselves as dual heritage; 41 were Asian (6%); and 33 (5%) said they were Other. Again this is broadly in line with the national profile of young offenders.

Ethnicity	Number	%
White	89,366	84
Mixed	3,784	4
Asian or Asian British	4,295	4
Black or Black British	6,483	6
Other	494	0
Not Known	2,547	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,969</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Youth Justice Board statistics, 2009–10

# GROWING UP, INFLUENCES AND BEHAVIOUR

## Family

To better understand what factors trigger young people's offending and entry into the youth justice system, we need to understand the environments they are growing up in, their relationship with their family and friends which help to shape who they are, the way they behave and their emotional resilience, and to discover what support networks they have. Who can they turn to for advice? What role models do they look up to?

We already know that the vast number of young people in contact with the youth justice system do not live in 'traditional' families. Family life for many of them is often rather complicated. Rather than experiencing a nuclear family with a married mother and father and blood siblings, for the majority of the respondents, the qualitative research suggests that family is synonymous with just mum. Yet, an overwhelming majority of young people described having a good (40%) or very good (38%) relationship with their family. Only 9% described their relationship with their family as "bad" or "very bad".

Yet violence and sexual assault at home came up in the focus groups as well as: being ignored; a lack of communication – what childcare professionals would term neglect; mums and dads letting them down; being kicked out of home; and poor relationships with step dads. One young person said they tried to be out of the house 24/7.

*"My mum kicked me out so I was staying on the streets sometimes or staying with me mates mostly."*

*"Don't come from the kind of families where you talk about your feelings. 'My day was pretty shit. How was yours?' That is it."*

*"The only time I got attention off my mum ... she would turn up at court, and my dad as well."*

*"When he is angry, you are like going to see it from when you are 9," said a young man brought up by his dad.*

Some of the young people were aware that experiences at home sometimes had a negative impact on them, making it difficult for them to build up trusting relationships or causing feelings of pent up anger.

*Asked why they found it difficult to trust people, one young man replied, "Because I have been let down by my mum and dad ... that is why I just like ran away."*

*"Every time I get close to someone they push me away," said a young woman describing her experiences of foster care.*

Many expressed the desire to have a "steady", "settled" and "stable" life in the future. *"Normal, the opposite of the life I live now,"* was how one young person described his aspirations.

The fact that a large number of the 175 young people in the focus groups had either been in care or fostered at some point, and most had come into contact with social services, suggests that their family was unable to give them the best start in life and the stability and security that young people need. What young people mean by stability and security is emotional support that can be provided by friends, family and peers; support from role models or sports activities such as belonging to a football team; the financial

security that having a job or good grades at school can bring; and the geographical stability of feeling as if you are part of a local community.

## Role models

Although many of the young people described being close to their mothers, they did not turn to them when they got into trouble or had problems because they did not want to worry them or they were trying to protect them. Fathers did not figure in many of the young people's lives and step-dads were almost exclusively mentioned in a negative light. *"He hates me so I don't really get on with him,"* said one respondent.

More than half (55%) of the young people said they didn't have any role model. Of those that did, the most frequently cited were immediate family members (64%), of which mothers came top (26%). However, these are the same mothers they do not want to ask for help for fear of worrying them. They also turned to siblings (20%) and to fathers (17%).

In the focus groups, family was not mentioned around discussions of 'who would you turn to'. It appears that the young people felt they had no option but to rely upon themselves.

*"I'm my own role model."*

*"You can only really rely on yourself."*

*"Myself. I just get on with it."*

Of those that cited brothers as role models (16%), it is clear that some brothers are a good influence, but others could be bad role models.

*“He [my brother] has always had a job since he left school. He is 23 but he has got a kid and he looks after his kid. He has got his own place and stuff like that... That is what I want.”*

*“My dad, my brothers – they’ve been to prison, they’ve done the same thing so I just ask them about it.”*

## Friends

Despite troubled family life and lack of family role models, friends do not feature much as substitute support networks. Only 7% cited friends as role models. Most of the young people have friends like themselves who have been in trouble with the police. More than half (52%) knew of ten or more of their friends who had been in trouble with the law, and a further 23% said that between 4 to 10 of their friends had been. Many feel they can only relate to other young people with similar experiences.

*“If you have a friend that’s gone straight, you look after your friends that doing the same as you more.”*

Yet others feel that their peer group are part of the reason they offend and want to keep their distance.

*“My mates are still there for me. I go smoke with them but I never go with them when they done stuff.”*

Many young people find it difficult to build up trust with adults who in their experience are always letting them down. This also manifests itself in their relationship with friends.

*“I got mates but you just don’t know who to trust.”*

*“I don’t want to be getting close to no one.”*

## Social services and care services

Other influential people include social services and child care professionals who have intervened in their lives to support their families. Young women seemed to have found the support they received from social services more helpful than the young men, although it is not clear why this is.

*“She showed me a lot of things, like you can get somewhere like even though I am a criminal – I can do a lot of things and she showed me that my family is there for me. And that they ain’t going to betray me or anything.” (Female)*

The young people all expect social services to provide help addressing family issues, rather than their offending behaviour. But generally social services is painted in a very negative light and the young people said the various responsibilities of the different services the social worker engages with were not made transparent to them. This failing could be because resources are being put into risk management at the expense of emotional and personalised support services.

*“They just make things a lot worse for you really. Half of the people who do fostering are only doing it for the money. They don’t really care about you.”*

Although research shows that children in care are three times more likely to receive a caution or conviction, it was not clear whether being taken into care had helped or hindered our respondents’ offending. One young person thought they would have offended more by now and would be in prison if they had stayed at home, another said he was in care because he was a risk to his parents.

## Happiness

Despite their complex lives, difficult friendships and relationships with family members and adults, 93% of the young people surveyed said they felt happy “some” (55%) or “a lot” of the time (38%). Only 3% said they “never” felt happy and 4% preferred not to say. Yet this is not borne out by their responses to discussion topics. *“Life isn’t happy man. Not in this sort of environment. The environment is evil man,”* said one respondent. Perhaps this is indicative of the young people being unable or unwilling to express their true feelings and using a positive spin on life as a coping mechanism to deal with their negative feelings.

## COPING MECHANISMS

### Drugs and alcohol

We have seen that many of the young people don't have the support networks in place to build their resilience and to help them deal with the anxieties, hurt and anger they have experienced in their day to day lives. As a result, many appear to turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. But unfortunately, alcohol and drug consumption often appears to trigger their criminal activity. Although most of the young people don't view their drug or alcohol consumption as a problem, almost a third of the young people surveyed were aware that alcohol was a trigger for their criminal behaviour and more than a quarter identified drugs as a trigger.

Almost three quarters (74%) of the 10 to 21 year olds said they had taken drugs and 81% consumed alcohol. But only 16% who had taken drugs thought they had a drugs problem. Similarly, of those who drank alcohol, only 10% thought they had a drink problem.

A large number of the young people in the focus groups regularly smoke cannabis. The reasons they gave range from "chilling" to helping them "to go to sleep", or making them feel more confident.

*"Going through a rough patch ... So I take my drugs (a joint). I just enjoy it ... it gives me more confidence and stuff. It makes you feel better."*

*"When I started smoking weed I was on an ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder] tablet and they did nothing to me like absolutely nothing, that's why I know that when I'm on pot I'm just relaxing."*



*"I've been smoking [cannabis] for at least 7 years now, since I was 11 ... I started because of family problems and then I got addicted to it."*

Only a few young people in discussions saw a correlation between their drug use and their offending. As one young person said:

*"Doing burglary for money init to get the drugs, that is what I am in here for."*

The reasons for drinking alcohol ranged from having fun with mates at the weekend to using it as an anti-depressant, countering feelings of lack of confidence, and quelling boredom. As another put it:

*"Not really much to do so people get smashed, it gives you confidence."*

Some young people said they committed crime when they drank alcohol as it made them do stupid things or they became more violent.

*"When I drink I do shit that I wouldn't normally do when I was sober. When you are drinking you commit a crime without thinking about it."*

*"I just like to do things when I'm drunk. I get stupid."*

A few young people said they don't drink anymore, so perhaps they have realised that drinking triggers their own offending behaviour.

## Violence

There appears to be a strong link for the young people between taking action that they perceive as standing up for themselves, winning respect, or ensuring self preservation – all means of coping with their environment – and getting into trouble with the law. The line between fighting in order to stand up for oneself, violence and aggression and criminal behaviour is very blurred to a number of young people. As one young person put it, *“I am not a criminal, I am a fighter.”*

*“I think I done it more for status... my reputation... so I could walk around my area without really being messed with.”*

*“If a boy disrespects me then I am going to do ting.”*

*“If someone comes to you and punches you in the face you’re not gonna stand there...you gonna punch them back.”*

So the young people's main coping mechanisms – drugs, alcohol and violence – can all result in criminal activity.

# OFFENDING

## Triggers

The triggers most frequently identified by the young people were:

- money (47%)
- friends (40%)
- alcohol (31%)
- family (28%)
- drugs (27%)
- gangs (27%)

*"A lot of boys and even girls want a lot of material things like Gucci and all this so they rob people's Gucci belts, or even try to rob money to get the stuff what they need ... a lot of it is money."*

*"The adrenaline, the money making... You are making money out of even enjoying yourself."*

*"It was friends... they were older than me and I always did look up to them and they never used to tell me to do good things."*

*"Money ... anger ... self protection ..."*

A fifth of young people blamed a lack of opportunities for their criminal behaviour, one in 10 cited homelessness and 8% of young people said abuse was the reason for their offending.

In the questionnaire, only 15 respondents talked about boredom, or nothing to do (which linked to lack of opportunities) and four mentioned the "buzz", "the rush" and "fun" of committing crime, which further suggests they are bored. But it is not as big an issue as

commonly assumed. More important are the underlying issues that have previously been identified.

“Going through a rough time”, or having “no support”, or suffering bereavement in the family were other reasons given for offending.

Although anger was not often identified by young people themselves as a reason for offending, we know that many of the young people feel angry because of things that have happened at home.

*“I’ve seen my step dad batter my mum. I battered him a few times myself. That is where it [the anger] has mainly come from.”*

This anger often manifests itself in violent behaviour. Most of the males said they had undergone some kind of anger management, and anger did feature in some of the discussions around their criminal behaviour.

*“Drugs, drink, my mates. Angry.”* [reasons given for offending]

Most respondents thought that they were ultimately responsible for their actions.

*“I think for myself, no one can tell me to go and do something, so it’s [committing an offence] not about friends.”*

*“The YOT tells me don’t do crime... it’s not like that. Cause it’s me, nobody else, it’s me [who decides if I commit a crime].”*

## Crimes committed

The most frequent type of crime the young people had committed were violent crimes (45%), which included GBH, ABH and assault. This was followed by robbery (27%) and theft and handling (26%). Drug offences only accounted for 11% of crime.

Of the 665 respondents who answered about their sentencing history, the majority (57%) had received between 1–3 sentences in court. But 150 of those young people (15%) had received more than 10 sentences in their young lives.

# EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH OFFENDING SERVICES

The young people had experienced a wide range of Youth Offending Services (YOS) that are designed to both punish but also to rehabilitate.

## Youth Offending Teams

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) were the most frequently used service by 87% of the respondents. On a sliding scale, there were almost as many who thought that the YOS had made “no difference” (16%) as those who thought it had made a “huge difference” (18%), but by far the most frequently expressed view (36% of respondents) was that the YOS had made a “reasonable” difference to their lives.

Some of the young people had built up a good relationship with their YOT worker who they believed had helped them in different ways: to stand up to peer pressure; learn new skills; and think about the consequences of their actions. However, a number of the young people did not find the YOT very helpful in reducing their re-offending and they perceive it as something they have to do, and were struggling to understand the point of it, especially weekday sessions. They complained about the frequency of contact they had to have with their YOT worker.

A number of young people appeared to prefer one-to-one sessions with their YOT worker rather than group work. The more hands on activities, such as education, placements and work experience, appeared more useful to them than verbally-based sessions. Given that young people in the criminal justice system are five times as likely to have a statement of special educational needs and more than half those on detention and training orders

have literacy and numeracy levels below that expected of an 11 year old, although their average age is 17, it is not surprising that they do not feel comfortable verbalising their thoughts. Some also found it difficult to trust the YOT workers whilst others – all male – questioned the ability of the workers to relate to their experiences.

*“My YOT worker is trying to get me a CSCS (Construction skills certification scheme) card. That is positive.”*

*“There are things I’ve told her [the YOT worker] that I didn’t tell my mum,” (Female)*

*“I know more about myself than I did in the past. My YOT worker and my psychology worker, we had a family meeting... I got to realise what my triggers were... They both understand me like they get on with me... I have learned when I need to walk away...”*

*“They have talked about consequences which made me think about stuff before I do it. Now I think before I do something stupid.”*

*“I prefer the one-to-one than the groups. Lots more gets said.”*

*“When I came out of jail YOT structured my lifestyle because I was not used to being on the outside – if I had had no one to help I probably would have gone straight back in.”*

*“If you have a once a week team and you come in and you sit down and talk and do what the average YOT does do, what is actually stopping them from re-offending?”*

*"The YOT thing is a waste of time. You are not learning nothing."*

*"They don't actually stick with you and say 'do you actually want to do this' and if you say 'yes', 'I'll tell you what we'll do'... and help you go to college. No, as long as you have done the groups they leave you to fend for yourself."*

## Custodial sentences

Many of the young people had been locked up – 21% in a Secure Training Centre (STC), 19% in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) and 10% in a Secure Children's Home (SCH). Some had experienced more than one form of youth custody.

## Young Offender Institutions

Young people most objected to being away from family and friends, and the restriction of freedom in a YOI. Obviously taking away an offender's liberty is the punishment, but what about the rehabilitation which YOIs are also supposed to provide? A number of young people stated that YOIs should be stricter. Some liked the routine, free access to the gym and the ability to live healthily. They saw it as a respite from the chaos of their 'normal' life and therefore not a punishment or deterrent.

Those who had been in once found it had helped them to gain some qualifications such as Level 1 Electrical or a Health and Safety card. Yet for those who had been to YOIs several times, they complained that the education was below their level. They appeared to want to learn and to be different when they came out, but they felt that the opportunities weren't being provided. They weren't sure if more education would stop them re-offending, but they thought having qualifications might help them to get a job (which many identified as their way out of crime).



*"They try and get you to go on a training scheme with something you don't want to do. I don't want to be a carpenter or a plumber. But the only things training wise they could get is stuff like that. It is all construction."*

*"They could do a lot differently. Like change the hours that you are out your pad. And how you eat your meals. And just be a lot stricter. So you could learn something. You just feel the same when you get out."*

*"It might not help with re-offending but... if you have got more knowledge behind you, like more certificates, you have got more chance of being able to find a job or find summat like you enjoy doing."*

*"You tell them [careers people] what you want to do and they give you something completely different."*

## Prison

The term prison was used interchangeably with YOI or simply 'inside', which made it difficult to distinguish between the different institutions. Hence, the prison category should be read in conjunction with the YOI category above.

Most focus groups said they had some experience of prison. Many of the young people said they did not feel that prison had a positive impact on their offending behaviour. They felt it should be stricter and the education of a higher standard, although some found it had improved their education and again they liked the routine and discipline.

*"It is easy because it's routine. I find it harder out here then I do in jail."*

## Secure Training Centres and Secure Children's Homes

There appeared to be no distinction made by the young people between any of the secure establishments. Overall, they seemed to see “no point” in them other than to restrict freedom which most, not surprisingly, didn't like.

*“They ... don't really get taught any lessons. It is like once your time is done, you go back out into the community and then cause trouble again and then go back in there.” [STC]*

Of the few young people who had been in a SCH, they again likened the experience to that of YOIs.

Other services the young people surveyed had come into contact with as a result of their criminal activity included some form of drugs and alcohol counselling (35%), probation (20%) – of which there was an even split between those that thought it had helped and others who thought it had not – and other types of counselling (16%).

## Counselling

Few of the young people in the focus groups were taking part in counselling sessions. Within this context, most did not feel that talking about their issues, anxieties, or offending behaviour was going to change anything. As we have seen, they described that they are used to having to “sort things out” for themselves rather than talking through problems with someone. Many young offenders also find it difficult to build up trust with adults because they reported being let down so many times and this manifests itself in having a poor relationship with the counsellors. However, for some young people counselling helped them to understand why they behave in certain ways.

*"All they wanna do, counselling, is to try to stop you from smoking but at the end of the day they can't tell you to stop smoking, it's up to your decision."*

*"I know more about myself than I did in the past. How people ... like people I never used to get on with ... used to really hate my guts and like now they understand me more and where I am coming from. So like get on better with me now."*

## Drugs counselling

The majority of the young people have experienced help with drugs although most of them don't identify their drug use as a problem. However, many young people said that of all the services they'd been in contact with, drug counselling was the best.

*"You can talk openly. They don't pressure you."*

*"He tells you about the effects of all the different drugs. Very helpful. You don't know what you smoke. You don't know what is in the stuff."*

## Anger management courses

Most of the male young offenders had been on an anger management course although very few identified anger as a reason for committing crime or identified it as a problem. Some said the course didn't help. Of those it had, reasons included:

*"They give you advice, opinion. You get to say your point. You get heard. People listen to you as well."*

*"It gives you different coping strategies. It is the only thing I've found useful since I've been here."*

## How the young people would change Youth Offending Services

Despite the many failings of the YOS they'd experienced, when asked what they would change, more than a quarter of the young people (26%) said nothing and 14% said they didn't know. Of those that had ideas for improving the services, 11% wanted a change in the contact arrangements. Some identified ways of making it easier for the young people to see their YOT worker regularly, so for example they suggested that the YOT worker came to them rather than the young person having to travel across town to the YOT office. Some of the young people were tagged and had a curfew and were worried that they may get home late from a visit and as a result end up in court again. Many wanted fewer appointments, groups and hours. Others wanted more education, or suggested a more personal, one-to-one tailored approach to each young person instead of relying on group work.

*"You should come up to us and speak to us individually. This is the time [age 10–21] when youths keep things to themselves. This is why they do things like this."*

Other options for improving the services included boys having male support workers and girls having women support workers, *"adults who you could relate to"* and *"YOS workers with offending history that have sorted themselves out"*.

*"I find it easier when the people who worked with me understood and had been through the same things that I had been through."*  
(Female)

*"I would have found it more helpful if there had been more people who had had the same background as me."*

## DETERRING YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RE-OFFENDING

To understand what could deter young offenders from future criminal activity we need to know what they themselves identify as potentially successful deterrents and to appreciate their aspirations.

Only 12% of young people surveyed thought it “quite likely” that they would re-offend, compared to 41% who said it was “not at all likely”. Yet Ministry of Justice statistics show that a third of young criminals in England and Wales re-offend within a year. These figures clearly demonstrate that the YOS are failing to divert young people away from criminal activities. Governments have introduced tougher penalties for knife crime and in London the police are stepping up anti-gang crackdowns. Will harsher penalties, or more likelihood of detection scare young people into a law abiding existence?

When asked to choose between three deterrents as to the one most likely to succeed, the young people were pretty evenly split between “higher chance of getting caught” (28%), “higher sentences” (33%) and “family disapproval” (36%).

### Fear of going to prison

Some 18% said they were “very worried” about the prospect of a prison sentence and a further 23% were “quite worried”. Overall, analysis of the answers suggests that the young people surveyed were worried by the thought of going to prison but not excessively so.

They said if they were in a situation where they felt they couldn't help but commit a crime then prison wouldn't act as a deterrent. After a couple of days, they thought they would settle into prison. One young person said prison was good for “making friends” and getting away from their family. Another said: *“I'm not scared of being*

*locked up with a lot of people like me.”* In some cases it appears to be welcome as respite, rather than a deterrent.

## Friends

Only 3% said their social circle was likely to be a factor in reducing their re-offending. And since more than half didn't have any role models, perhaps it is no surprise that 9% said it was down to them whether or not they re-offended.

## Work, money and a family

The most likely deterrents they identified themselves were work or a career (13%); money (8%); and their existing or potential future family (partner/children) to consider (16%). A further 7% mentioned a combination of these factors including a job, a family, and a steady income. These deterrents look strikingly similar to the young people's aspirations for the future.

## Aspirations

By the age of 25, more than half of the young people wanted what could be described as a 'good life', involving some or all of the following: a good job, a happy family life with a partner and children, a nice home, a car and money. A further 20% singled out a good career ranging from being a plumber, carpenter or electrician, to having their own business. Some 9% aspired to money and wealth (which a job could secure). Only 7% didn't know what they wanted for the future. A handful wanted to be footballers, go to university or college, or join the army.

## Barriers to achieving aspirations and reducing crime

The main barrier the young people identified as preventing them from achieving their aspirations was their criminal record. This made it difficult to get the job they wanted and, in their experience, the YOS wasn't helping to increase their employability.

The lack of opportunities they had for employment because of their criminal record was a huge issue in the discussion groups.

*"I do it [crime] obviously to earn money fast... I would love to have [a job]. There is a stigma when you go for a job, you feel your criminal record will hold you up."*

Young people were keen for the YOS to provide better opportunities to improve their education and get more qualifications as they appreciated this could increase their chances of getting a job.

The limitations of the YOS were highlighted by one young person who was unable to attend a full-time vocational college course because they could lose their housing benefits and become homeless.

The talents and abilities, which the young people perceived themselves to have, ranged from being good at sports (52%), to practical/vocational skills, such as motor mechanics or carpentry (23%) and creative skills, such as music (17%). In addition to trades or running their own business, some young people said they felt they had the life experience to make a good YOS worker but CRB checks were an obvious hurdle. A suggestion was made that instead of a CRB check simply blocking employment opportunities, employers should consider a reference from the local YOS saying that, *"you've been through the YOS, this is how long you've not been in trouble and you are capable of doing this or that job."*

*"I feel I can use my experiences to drive people away from committing daft offences."*

## CAN WE WORK TOGETHER TO REDUCE YOUTH CRIME?

The What's Your Story project culminated at the Annual Youth Justice Convention in November 2011 where User Voice facilitated workshops held in the Open Space format and focusing on one central question: How can we work together to reduce youth crime?

The Open Space workshops involved 25 young people who had been nominated by 175 of their peers from the 36 focus groups around the country to represent the views of young offenders, alongside policymakers and practitioners from across the youth justice system. Throughout the workshops participants filtered what they chose to discuss by voting on the issues and ideas they believed were most important.

Issues discussed in breakout groups included career opportunities for young offenders, engaging better with young people, improving services for young offenders, providing more support for young women offenders, lack of educational opportunities, stop and search and the behaviour of the police towards young people, effective intervention and peer mentoring.

Comments from the young people included:

*"Why put me in a gang awareness course when I'm not in a gang? I'd rather do a boxing course. It would keep me off the streets and give me something I'd enjoy doing."*

*"People ask why we get into trouble, but there's nothing to do where I live. We want a football pitch but the place we could play there's no fence."*





*"I'd like to go to college but I will lose my benefits and could become homeless."*

*"They [YOT workers] can't understand us and what we've gone through. I've been moved from children's home to foster care. I couldn't settle properly. Prison was more stable. Now I've changed but not been given the right support to move on. I only see my aftercare worker once a month and I'm not allowed his mobile number to text him and say what I'm doing."*

*"Need ex young offenders to go into schools and tell young kids how it is. I've been in prison for violent crime. I've got a kid now. I've changed."*

*"Need people with the same lingo, same background sitting down with us and giving us support."*

*"You don't get a second chance. Just labelled as a criminal. CRB checks should only be if working with children, not for every job."*

*"We need a lot more work experience and apprenticeships. I'm a practical guy most likely succeed as a motor mechanic."*

*"Today shows we are taken seriously, not just as hooligans."*

Comments from youth offending team staff included:

*"Our social worker training says not to tell the young people if you've been through similar problems because it personalises the relationship."*

*"Workers get lost in the admin, making sure the young people are safe on paper but it'd probably be better to speak to you [the young people] for two hours."*

*"What they [the young people] want is a consistent person alongside them, that gives a damn and talks their language, been through it themselves. They don't care what service provides it."*

*"The YOS needs to step up and make a pledge to take them [young ex-offenders] on as YOT workers."*

*"We need to challenge employers who are turning away young offenders for being too high risk."*

*"We need to get a service modelled by young people."*

Comments from policymakers and senior practitioners in the youth justice system included:

Mick McNally, team leader, ending gang and youth violence, Home Office: *"Engaging young people in this activity gives you a really good idea of what works and what doesn't."*

Bob Ashford, director of strategy, YJB: *"I can't come away from today without taking away the voices and messages ringing loud and clear in my head to other colleagues in the YJB and other government departments."*

Frances Done, chair, YJB: *"These young people are inspiring. These are young people who've had massive difficulties and yet they are standing up and looking you full in the face and telling you what needs to be done in youth justice to make sure they can have a future."*

Michelle Dyson, youth policy unit, Ministry of Justice: *"I've been inspired by what I've heard today. I will feed into ministers what the young people are saying and hopefully it will make a difference in the longer-term."*

Paul Cook, managing director, G4S children's services: *"The real issue is the untapped potential and how we can get the young people to work as peer mentors. Before we start preaching to employers we need to get our own house in order."*

Eva Tyler, head of comms, YJB: *"The power of this is that we are listening to young people in a new way."*

Bob Reitemeier, board member, YJB: *"We're really here to focus on giving young people a second, third, fourth and fifth chance."*

At the end of the two Open Space workshops, the participants – young people, policymakers and YOS practitioners – voted for their top ten co-produced recommendations to take forward as an action plan to present to the YJB centrally, teams regionally/locally and other partners.

## Recommendations and action plan

1. A User Voice Conference (where more practitioners can hear from young ex-offenders how the YOS could better prevent young people from re-offending).
2. Ex-young offenders to be given the opportunity to become peer mentors.
3. Look at criminal records policy in order to help more young offenders gain employment by working with other young offenders.
4. More resources for YOTs.
5. Influence employers to hire more ex-offenders. YOTs should take the lead and have positive discrimination for ex-offenders.
6. Give young offenders more of a voice.
- 7.= Provide more individualised and personalised support which is specific to young offenders' needs and flexible to their lifestyles.
- 7.= Everyone should be better listeners.
9. Specialised training for police in issues such as anger management, racism, respect and communication skills.
10. Focus on positives and abilities of young people, rather than negatives and risks.

Some of the young people were invited to speak at the closing session of the entire convention and present their co-produced action plan to demonstrate how young people and the YOS can work together to reduce youth crime. In response, Frances Done, YJB chair, committed to reviewing the employment of young offenders in YOS.

*"I pledge that we will look at our contracts and see what we can do regarding the employment of youth offenders,"* Frances Done, YJB chair.

A few weeks after the conference, 16 of the young people were invited to the Houses of Parliament. On 5 December 2011, they presented the action plan from the project and discussed how to take it forward with MPs and peers including Prisons Minister, Crispin Blunt.

*“The next step is to see what they are actually going to do. We’ve done what we can. It’s up to them now.” (User Voice youth rep)*



# BACKGROUND TO THE WHAT'S YOUR STORY PROJECT

## History of What's Your Story

In 2010 User Voice undertook a nationwide Excluded Youth Project, entitled What's Your Story? It was recognised that plenty of publications and events deal with the problems faced by children and young people excluded from society. However, few involve those who would contribute the most – the young people themselves – choosing instead to consult exclusively with policymakers and service providers. Failing to include young people only leads to further exclusion and desperation, igniting rather than easing anti-social behaviour, violence and criminality. Only by involving these young people in the decision making process can we give them what they need to make it back into mainstream society.

As a result User Voice engaged with nearly 600 young people aged 12 to 27 with experience of criminal justice services or those at risk of offending. As far as we are aware, this consultation was unique in England in combining a user-led approach on this scale, with this group, across nationwide geographic locations. A total of 582 surveys were completed by excluded young people, of whom 325 attended 22 focus groups throughout England. These participants self-selected 30 representatives who attended a final Open Space event in Westminster with senior politicians and policymakers.

The purpose was never simply to restate the problems faced by the group of young people but to provide an opportunity for service providers and service users to work together in designing solutions. Our final report, *What's Your Story? Summary of young offenders' insights into tackling youth crime and its causes*, published at the end of 2010 reflected the discussions that took place between

30 of the young people and 25 policymakers, including MPs and representatives from the Ministry of Justice, National Offender Management Service, prisons (public and private), probation and the Youth Justice Board.

## Aims and objectives

This project is replicating the process undertaken in the Excluded Youth Project, engaging with a wide number of excluded young people and then filtering their voice into a group of self selected leaders who can participate in the Annual Youth Justice Convention, enabling practitioners and policymakers to speak directly with young people to identify solutions. The aim is to push the voice of young people to the centre of the convention, showcasing the benefits of youth engagement and co-production, which has never been done before on this scale. The main difference from the previous Excluded Youth Project is that the young people involved will be identified solely through having experience of YJB commissioned services.

## Why User Voice?

The entrenched exclusion and complex needs of young people with experience of the youth justice system creates a huge barrier and an obstacle for service providers. User Voice's work is led and delivered by ex-offenders. This means that we are uniquely placed to gain their trust and motivate them to talk about their lives, to express their views and to articulate their hopes and fears. Our primary aim is to enable practitioners and policymakers to listen directly to service users, allowing unheard voices to make a difference.

User Voice was founded by Mark Johnson, an ex-offender and former drug abuser, best-selling author of *Wasted* and social commentator. Mark's experiences of prison, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and consultant within the criminal justice system



and voluntary sector, convinced him of the need to create a model of engagement that is fair and incentive led. His aim was to foster dialogue between service providers and users, which results in better and more cost-effective services. It does this through: User Voice councils that can be developed for use within prisons or in the community for probation, youth offending teams and related services; bespoke consultations; and raising awareness.

Since User Voice received charitable status in 2010, it has created new prison councils involving staff and prisoners and consulted on skills and employment, drug and alcohol services, social services and probation.

## The project

This six month, privately funded project began in June 2011 and ran until the Annual Youth Justice Convention in November 2011. All participants were drawn from having experience of YJB-commissioned services between the ages of 10 to 21.

## What's Your Story had three main objectives:

1. To undertake a major youth-led consultation with young people about their experiences of youth justice services and the causes of youth crime.
2. To make sure that the views and voices of these young people are captured and shared with practitioners and policymakers.
3. To enable young people to select their own representatives to work with service providers to develop co-produced solutions.

Three broad questions underpinned the consultation design:

- What factors do young people identify as triggering their offending behaviour and entry into the youth justice system?

- What is the impact and experience of youth justice services from young people's perspectives? What works, what doesn't and why?
- What could have been done to avoid them getting into trouble and what solutions can young people suggest to prevent re-offending?

The project culminated at the Annual Youth Justice Convention in November 2011 where User Voice facilitated workshops held in the Open Space format. Open Space events focus on one central question. In this instance: How can we work together to reduce youth crime? Other than this, there is no set agenda. Instead participants, informed by young people's earlier engagement in regional focus groups, identify the key issues they wish to discuss. The process is designed to encourage participation and equality of engagement. User Voice proposes this route because the Open Space approach seems appropriate in engaging this group, many of whom are not used to traditional meetings.

The discussion groups included young people from around the country, alongside policymakers and practitioners from across the youth justice system. Throughout the workshops participants filtered what they chose to discuss through what Open Space calls 'dot democracy': voting on the issues and ideas they believe are most important. These are summarised in 'real time' and the most popular announced towards the end of the convention, giving all participants an immediate response and action plan from the discussions to take back to their regions which have been co-produced between service users and providers.

## Report

The discussions and information provided by the young people as a result of the consultation more widely and Open Space workshops specifically has been analysed and compiled into this report that

captures all the key messages from the service users and providers and clearly sets out the co-produced recommendations for the YJB centrally and teams regionally/locally and other partners.

**Funded by**



And the generous donations  
of individuals and members of  
the general public.

**With thanks to**



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Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1136047

Designed and typeset by Soapbox, [www.soapbox.co.uk](http://www.soapbox.co.uk)

What's Your Story? 2011: Excluded Youth Project: How Can

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