



**Effectiveness of Approaches to Prevent
Re-Offending in Young People: A Rapid Review
of the Evidence**

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Role of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit

A collaborative research placement is a piece of student research that is conducted in partnership with an external organisation. For this project, the main point of contact was Dr Kirsten Russell (Analyst Researcher within the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit). Kirsten was involved in defining the scope and methodology of the research presented (alongside Martina and the division supervisor Dr Penny Woolnough) and provided brief feedback on the report. The views and conclusions expressed within the report are those of the student researcher and are independent of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit. It is important to note that this report does not purport to provide an exhaustive and definitive account of the evidence in this area. Rather, it constitutes a collation of evidence that was identified and accessed during the time available. This report aims to be a foundation upon which new and existing research can be added as it becomes available or is identified in the future.

While there has been a reduction in the number of people within the youth justice system, young people have been found to be amongst the most likely to re-offend (Adler et al., 2016). With this in mind, this report focuses on exploring approaches to prevent violent re-offending in young people, between the ages of 10 and 29, with a focus on UK evidence published from 2015 onwards. The age range has been chosen to be in line with previous reports (Russell, 2021) taking into consideration that human brains are not fully developed until the age of 29. To facilitate interpretation, approaches/interventions are classified into six different effectiveness categories (effective, promising, mixed, no effect, negative/potentially harmful and ineffective). The definitions of each of these categories of effectiveness are in line with a recent Scottish Government [report](#) examining “what works” to prevent youth violence before it happens.

Effective approaches

Effective approaches are those approaches that are supported by either moderate or strong evidence to positively affect the reduction in re-offending in young people (Russell, 2021). The following approaches are considered as such:

Counselling

Counselling refers to any programmes that involve a relationship between a young person and a professional who aims to influence their thoughts and behaviours (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). Counselling is well-evidenced and effective in reducing re-offending, with group and family counselling being most successful. Peer counselling and short one-off sessions seemed to be the least effective approaches, possibly due to interventions being brief and the absence of a trained counsellor to take the lead (Brooks et al., 2019;

O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). Moreover, O'Connor and Waddell (2015) reported that interventions that were of a higher quality lowered recidivism, but it was not clear what comprised better quality.

Family-focused interventions

Interventions at a family level have been found to be some of the most successful in supporting and preventing re-offending in young people (Adler et al., 2016). For example, family-based counselling that helped parents to develop their parenting skills were identified by Brooks et al. (2019) to reduce reoffending by 13%. Some more specific approaches that included support programs for parents, as well as family interventions (Peden et al., 2019), are the following:

1. *Functional Family Therapy (FFT)*

FFT is a family program for young people between 11 and 18-years-old offered in England and Scotland that focuses on addressing risk factors within and outside the family environment. FFT consists of five phases (engagement, motivation, relational assessment, behaviour change and generalisation) that aim to develop better communication between parent and child and to build positive interactions as well as setting boundaries (Adler et al., 2016; Maxwell & Corliss, 2020). FFT has strong research evidence, both UK and international, suggesting it significantly reduces youth recidivism in different cultural contexts, especially when compared to young people receiving probation only (Adler et al., 2016; David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Maxwell & Corliss, 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). It is also important to mention that one of the reviews (Wieshmann et al., 2020) found some studies to show no effect on recidivism

rates, however, these studies had small sample sizes as well as intensive treatment-as-usual control conditions which might have affected the results.

2. *Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)*

MTFC is an alternative to residential care for young chronic offenders from the age of 3 to 18 (Adler et al., 2016; Maxwell & Corliss, 2020). Young offenders are placed with foster parents that have received specialized training and are supported and monitored throughout their stay which is typically between 9 and 12 months. MTFC is already delivered in 15 places in the UK (Maxwell & Corliss, 2020) and has been found in multiple reviews to be successful in reducing violent reoffending by about 72% (Adler et al., 2016; David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2019). Evidence from the US also found a reduction in antisocial behaviour and criminal activity. However, these results have not been replicated in the UK yet (Maxwell & Corliss, 2020).

3. *Multisystemic Therapy (MST)*

Multisystemic Therapy is a home-based family intervention for young people aged between 12 and 18 which lasts a period between 3 to 5 months. This approach aims to provide an alternative to out of home placements and engages the entire social network of the young person. It also involves a trained professional carrying out therapy sessions with both the families and the young people (Adler et al., 2016; Maxwell & Corliss, 2020). Strong research evidence supports that this approach reduces reoffending (Adler et al., 2016; POSTNOTE, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019), but

that it also reduces re-arrests and out-of-home placements as well as some risk factors later in life (David-Ferdon et al., 2016).

Skill Building Programmes

Skill-building programmes often involve the development of both life and social skills to help young people regulate their emotions and develop positive relationships, as well as deal with conflict and stress. These programmes often take the approach of sports programmes, but they are not limited to that (Peden et al., 2019). The most successful programs in reducing re-offending in young people were found to include behavioural or cognitive-behavioural techniques, followed by social skill development, while the least successful were seen to be programmes focused on job-related skills (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019). Interventions that focused on character-based skills and non-violent norms were also found to be effective in reducing recidivism (Brooks et al., 2019). Skill-based programmes also prevented aggressive behaviour and violence, and favoured the development of anger management, social and other life skills (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015).

Diversion programmes

Young people known to the justice system have been seen to be less able to desist from criminal activity compared to young people who have not been involved in the criminal justice system, even though they have taken part in criminal activity. Diversionary services aim to avoid and minimize the criminal justice system processes by diverting young people to sources of support or treatment to reduce re-offending (Adler et al., 2016; Peden et al., 2019). Diversion programmes have been found to be mostly effective,

although some variation is present between programs. Indeed, the approaches span from cautioning or warning and release to programmes involving family and restorative justice interventions (Adler et al., 2016). However, many programmes of this kind have been shown to be successful in reducing reoffending in the UK. For example, the Metropolitan Police Service's Lambeth DIVERT programme, the hospital based Redthread's Youth Violence Intervention Programme, and the Wakefield Council's Liaison and Diversion Service, have seen a reduction in reoffending in the young people who participated in these programmes. More detailed information about these programmes can be found in the following reports: Local Government Association, 2019; POSTNOTE, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019.

Promising approaches

Promising approaches are those that showed a positive impact on the reduction of re-offending in young people, but not to the extent that are considered to be effective approaches, or approaches supported by evidence that is considered weak or with limitations (Russell, 2021) and that consequently need more research. Promising approaches are the following:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a type of treatment that aims to identify thoughts and patterns that are problematic, to create coping mechanisms, and consequently change those behaviours (Adler et al., 2016; Wieshmann et al., 2020). Evidence found that CBT for young offenders reduces recidivism rates (Roberts et al., 2019; Wieshmann et al., 2020). Wieshmann et al. (2020) also found that the most effective components to include in those therapies were anger control and interpersonal problem-solving. However, some variance has been seen in the CBT-based programme Reasoning and Rehabilitation in England where no difference between participants and a control group was found (Adler et al., 2016). This variability might be due to the scale of the evaluation and the fact that the results are often influenced by the individual young person response.

Motivational Interviewing is also used as part of CBT for individuals that do not want to change, to help them accept the consequences of their behaviours (Adler et al., 2016).

However, evidence from this approach comes mainly from the US and it is out of scope for this review as it focuses on UK-based evidence.

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice is an approach that aims for rehabilitation, by focusing on repairing the harm that the offender caused, by encouraging them to reflect and accept their behaviour to avoid repeating it (Wieshmann et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2019). Restorative Justice often involves a meeting between the offender and victim, which is mediated by a facilitator, and can sometimes involve families and other parties such as social workers (Adler et al., 2016). While evidence from the US suggests that this is a promising approach (Adler et al., 2016), research from the UK seems to be more mixed. Two schemes (CONNECT and REMEDI) increased the possibility of re-conviction, while other programmes found Restorative Justice to have no effect. However, more recent and rigorous evidence suggests this approach to be promising in reducing re-offending. For example, Operation Turning Point, which has restorative conditions, found a reduction in violent crime of about 30% (Wieshmann et al., 2020). Meetings that include the parties' families have been found to be more effective in lowering recidivism rates in young offenders compared to meetings between just the victim and the offender, even though this effect vanished after a prolonged period of time. This approach was particularly effective with young girls (Adler et al., 2016).

Community sentencing

Sentencing can also contribute to lowering re-offending rates in young people. However, evidence from both the UK and the US suggests that community sentences are more

effective in reducing re-offending than prison sentences. Moreover, evidence suggests that community sentences were better than custodial sentences of 6 months or less. There was no difference in re-offending between shorter and longer prison sentences, suggesting that longer detention does not lower re-offending rates. On the other hand, the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP), a community-based program in England and Wales, found no long-term differences between people that took part in the program and those who received other types of sentencing. However, these results might be due to the differences with the comparison group (Adler et al., 2016).

Hospital-based programmes

Hospital-based programmes have been found to be effective in reducing re-offending in young people. The Youth Violence Intervention Project at St Mary's Hospital in London, in which young people involved in violence who showed up to the Emergency Department would be assessed and supported in their needs, either for mental health, housing or education, showed promising evidence suggesting a reduction in crime involvement and violence. However, this would apply only to those who engaged in the program, while there was no follow up for those who did not (Roberts et al., 2019). Similar evidence has been found in the US (David-Ferdon et al., 2016). However, the evidence is limited for the UK so Hospital-based programmes can be classified as promising.

Gang involvement programmes

Evidence on the effectiveness of gang involvement programmes is limited as most of the ones analysed in the reviews are very recent (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). However, a couple of successful programmes have been found in the UK. Empower (for 11 to 18-

year-olds) and London Gang Exit (for 16- to 24-year-olds) by Safer London, which focused on women and girls, reported an improvement in 80% of outcomes (Local Government Association, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019). Another programme in the UK is the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) in Glasgow to reduce gang involvement in young people. In this program, young people were asked to choose between service engagement, in which they would receive support if they changed their behaviour, or robust enforcement, where they were subjected to frequent stop and searches and other deterrence techniques. The programme resulted in a 46% reduction in violent offending and an 85% reduction in weapon carrying (College of Policing Limited, 2021; Maxwell & Corliss, 2020). However, these results are limited due to the absence of long-term data.

Other approaches

Some approaches/interventions were mentioned by some of the reviews examined, however, the evidence presented was too limited to properly evaluate their effectiveness. These programmes were: hot-spot policing (Roberts et al., 2019), Wilderness programmes (Adler et al., 2016), prison education programmes (Wieshmann et al., 2020), Trauma-informed services (Peden et al., 2019), School inclusion and Specialist children's services (POSTNOTE, 2019).

Approaches with mixed evidence

Approaches with mixed evidence are those that show evidence with contrasting results, either across different reports or in the same research, or evidence that has been deemed mixed by other reports (Russell, 2021). The mixed approaches/interventions identified are the following:

Mentoring

Mentoring usually involves a trained mentor that is a positive role model, that works with a young person, providing support and advice (Adler et al., 2016; Peden et al., 2019). Some studies have shown that mentoring does reduce the risk of aggression and delinquency in young people (Roberts et al., 2019), with a reduction in re-offending up to 21% for young offenders (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). Adler et al. (2016) also found a small but significant reduction in anti-social behaviour. However, these results must be interpreted with caution as the studies that do show a positive difference, have a lower methodological quality. Studies that are better designed, do not show any effects, and some even suggest a negative impact. Moreover, there is evidence highlighting that when benefits from mentoring are found, they do not always persist after the end of the intervention (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019). Research also found that mentoring seems to be more effective earlier in a young person's life, especially when paired with other interventions such as diversion or skills training (Adler et al., 2016). Finally, research also found that mentoring, if not delivered correctly by trained mentors, can have negative effects on the mental health of both the mentor and mentee (POSTNOTE, 2019).

Court setting

The court in which the young offenders are tried has been seen to have mixed results in reducing re-offending. Specifically, it has been found that the transferral of juvenile offenders to adult courts results in an increased risk of re-offending (Roberts et al., 2019). There is mixed research from the US, but the evidence is limited in the UK (Adler et al., 2016).

Transition and resettlement programs

Transition and resettlement programs are interventions, that aim to support offenders in their transition back to the community following incarceration. However, the evidence is limited and mixed due to how much they differ from each other. Evidence from the US is mixed but some UK programmes have been identified. Project Oracle found the most successful programmes to promote engagement, provide support and facilitate employment or education. The Resettlement Support Panel in Wales also found that programmes were more effective when they were separate from the supervision part of the sentence (Adler et al., 2016).

Other approaches

Aggression Replacement Training (Roberts et al., 2019) and Parent training programmes (Adler et al., 2016) also presented mixed evidence on their effectiveness on re-offending, however, it was not possible to carry out a full evaluation due to limited evidence.

Ineffective approaches

Ineffective approaches are those approaches/interventions that were found to have neither positive nor negative evidence for the reduction of re-offending in young people (Russell, 2021). The only programmes found to be ineffective was:

Disciplinary approaches

Discipline approaches are based on the idea that young people need to learn discipline in order to avoid crime and re-offending. This type of approach usually has a boot-camp format characterised by a strict schedule, physical activity, and rigid discipline (Adler et al., 2016; O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). Research has found this approach to be ineffective, with boot camp participants being just as likely to re-offend as young offenders under probation or in prison (Adler et al., 2016; Brooks et al., 2019; O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). However, there is evidence for improvement on later reoffending in young male offenders between 18 and 21 years old, when the intensive military regime is integrated with strong rehabilitative components such as in the case of “High Intensity Training” in England (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015).

Other programmes

Computer-based programmes were also found by one of the reviews to have no effect on re-offending (Brooks et al., 2019), however, it was not possible to carry out a full evaluation of their effectiveness due to the limited evidence.

Negative/potentially harmful approaches

Negative/potentially harmful approaches are those interventions that have been found to cause a negative effect on recidivism of young people, making it more likely (Russell, 2021). The following approach has been found to be negative/potentially harmful.

Deterrence and fear-based strategies

Deterrence based and fear-based programmes focus on deterring youth from re-offending, by using scare tactics or confrontational techniques to make them think about the consequences of their behaviours (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). Programmes such as Scared Straight, which consist of young offenders visiting adult prisons, increase youth re-offending in participants of the program (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019; Brooks et al., 2019). Other juvenile awareness programmes have been found to increase the re-offending rates as well, however, these studies are US based and focus mainly on males (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015).

Other programmes that use deterrence strategies as part of their approach found an effect on crime reduction. However, in these programmes, deterrence is used in combination with other approaches (Maxwell & Corliss, 2020).

Inconclusive approaches

Inconclusive approaches are interventions with insufficient evidence to be classified in any of the other categories (Russell, 2021) as well as approaches that present evidence that is out of scope of this review.

School environments

Since it is important for children within the youth justice system to experience secure and nurturing environments, some of the reviews suggest that modifying school environments might influence violent behaviours. However, the evidence is limited and mostly speculative (Peden et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2019). Consequently, this is an inconclusive approach until more research is conducted on the topic.

Conclusion

The review found many relevant approaches to reduce re-offending in young people. They were classified as the following:

- Effective approaches: Counselling, Family-focused interventions, Skill Building Programmes and Diversion programmes.
- Promising approaches: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Restorative Justice, Trauma-informed services, Community sentencing, Hospital-based and gang involvement programmes.
- Mixed evidence approaches: Mentoring, Parent training programmes, Court setting, and Transition and resettlement programs
- Ineffective approaches: Discipline approaches.
- Negative evidence approaches: Deterrence strategies.

- Inconclusive approaches: School environments.

Finally, there were some approaches that presented limited information in the research examined for this review, which is why they have not been evaluated.

Overall, the review found that many of the effective approaches in reducing violent re-offending focused on the individual to tackle behavioural issues, while fear and discipline-based approaches were mostly ineffective or harmful. Consequently, research should focus on programs that focus on the person and their close circle such as family. Promising approaches and those programmes that were not evaluated due to the lack of evidence in the reviews examined should also be looked at in more depth, to understand if they are viable options to aid the reduction in violent re-offending in young people. Mixed approaches should also be re-evaluated more closely, especially those that present potentially harmful evidence for the participants. Defining features of working programmes should also be established for those approaches/interventions that present a wide variety of methodologies, to understand which ones are more effective. Moreover, more research should be carried out on young people that are older than 18 as limited approaches have been applied to the upper part of this demographics. Finally, the majority of research is carried out in the US and many of the approaches are not present in this review. Therefore, they should be looked at and adapted for the UK to examine their validity.

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