‘WHAT HAVE WE DONE RIGHT?’
TARGETS AND YOUTH CRIME PREVENTION

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Abstract
The article considers the impact of targets set for criminal justice agencies on the effort to prevent youth crime. Targets are frequently counter-productive because organisations concentrate on the target rather than the work it is supposed to promote. In the case of youth crime, there have been apparently impressive reductions in the number of young people entering the criminal justice system as first offenders. Whether this is primarily the result of prevention of offending or diversion from the system is unclear. This uncertainty is discussed, along with contradictory policy directions in the response to youth crime which suggest the importance of prevention along with trends which may lead key organisations to turn against it.

Key words: Youth crime prevention; youth justice; targets; risk management

Introduction
It has become a commonplace (see e.g. Gilling, 2007; Solomon et al, 2007) that targets in the criminal justice sphere can have a distorting effect on the work to which they are applied, but it is rare that this should run to head-scratching about what it is an agency has done right. This is the situation in which youth offending services (YOS’s) in England & Wales find themselves, having for the most part significantly over-achieved on their target to prevent youth crime; or more specifically, “to reduce year on year the number of first time entrants (FTEs) to the youth justice system” (YJB, 2005).

The numbers have certainly reduced: a 21.6 per cent reduction against the 2005/06 baseline had been achieved nationally by 2008/09 (YJB, 2009) with far greater falls in many parts of the country. YOS’s are left to explain their success, some doing so alongside their partners in specially convened multi-agency meetings, while others send managers on fact-finding missions. This is the logic of targets: if they are missed, you are at fault; if they are achieved you must be doing something right. Yet life is rarely that simple: the interplay of numerous
real life factors and criminal justice processes to bring a given number of previously law-
abiding (officially at least) junior citizens through the gates of the criminal justice system for
the first time is unlikely to boil down to an easy explanation.

We know that the circumstances in which young people begin involvement in offending are
bound up with a range of social, family and personal conditions (see e.g. Farrington, 2007),
going beyond the scope of simple individualised explanations or interventions. There is no
substitute for basic structural measures to deal with poverty and deprivation, or at least for a
multiplicity of responses from a range of agencies (Sutton et al., 2004). Homel (2005: 2)
makes the case for universal rather than individualised preventive approaches in
disadvantaged communities, in preference to making “the rather questionable jump from
the identification of risk factors in longitudinal and population surveys to the identification
and control of ‘risky individuals’”.

Yet the implication of setting targets focused primarily on the work of YOS’s is that they can
be expected to exert some control over these social forces, “as local bundles of educational,
health, employment, crime, transport and housing problems” (Emmel, cited by Gilling,
2007). Thus in 2006 the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for England & Wales set out what
might be thought a rather fanciful formula to assist YOS’s to identify how many at risk
young people would have to be covered by preventive interventions in order to achieve a 5
per cent reduction in FTEs – as if this were an exact science capable of working to such
formulae (YJB, 2006). A subsequent publication (YJB, 2007: 14) refers to the YJB working
with YOS’s:

to develop a local ‘First Time Offender’ profiling tool (which) assists local partnerships
to drill into data around the circumstances of each FTE in their area... (in order to)
predict the likely profile of future FTEs and allocate resources/locate programmes in a
more focused manner.

Yet this same document emphasises that:

we must ensure that scarce resources are targeted on the small minority of young people
who would not just naturally desist after one or two episodes of antisocial behaviour
(ibid: 14).

Target-setting seems to give rise to an internal logic all of its own. The identification through
the target of cohorts of FTEs appears to have led the YJB to envisage them, as it were, as a
discrete group with discrete characteristics, capable of being identified and picked off.

YOS’s have attempted to follow this logic by examining the characteristics of these cohorts of
FTEs to see what they revealed about the targeting of their preventive efforts. I took on this
search for one YOS studying the characteristics of FTE cohorts for 2005 and 2008 but no
holy grail was forthcoming. While there appeared to be some concentrations of potential
risk factors for offending within the cohort in terms of deprivation and educational needs for example4, these were weaker than might have been expected. Similarly, while there was a degree of geographical clustering, this was limited and showed no obvious pattern of strong correlation with either deprivation levels or crime rates in different districts of the YOS area. This is not altogether surprising, given the fairly high proportion of young people who will commit an offence at some point (Hales et al, 2009), as against those for whom this becomes a regular activity.

Instead, both the composition of the cohorts, and movements in their numbers over time showed more signs of following the operation of criminal justice processes in the area. Most notable was the impact of policing targets to bring offenders to justice, the effect of which on youth justice in promoting "a greater use of formal responses to children’s behaviour that would previously have been dealt with outside of the youth justice system" (Nacro, 2008: 6) has been well documented elsewhere (see e.g. Bateman, 2008).

Thus I found that higher FTE rates for the initial cohort tended to occur in districts placing more emphasis on a performance culture. This evened out in the three years after 2005, which also saw a general reduction in FTE numbers. This trend in turn reflected efforts across the relevant police service (and nationally) to reduce the emphasis on formal processing of young offenders in favour of restorative approaches. FTE numbers reduced nationally (YJB, 2008) in the wake of the Association of Chief Police Officers’ Strategy for Young People introduced in January 20085 which promoted diversion and targeted intervention:

> to ensure policing responses are appropriate and graduated towards those young offenders who are at greatest risk of further anti-social behaviour and criminality (ACPO, 2008: 8).

This has been manifested primarily through the widespread adoption by the police of informal restorative interventions instead of formal criminal justice sanction for many first time young offenders, now formalised through the pilot by eight forces of the ‘Youth Restorative Disposal’ (YRD) (Ministry of Justice, 2007). There is a strong case for thinking that growing concerns amongst senior police officers about the negative impact of unnecessarily bringing minor young offenders to justice6 coupled with the availability of measures like the YRD as an alternative must have played a part at least in such reductions nationally7.

If this is the case, then different questions about prevention arise. Those ‘first offences’ have still occurred: they have just been dealt with in a way which allows their non-appearance in the figures, and hence the reduction in FTEs (or some of it, at least). And this, in turn, moves scrutiny on to the effectiveness of those disposals and any other interventions they might trigger to prevent further offending. This is preventive work just as much as any other
initiative to reduce the influx of ‘FTEs’ – but it is not preventing a first offence. Prevention of offending becomes mixed up with diversion from criminal justice processes, albeit there is an argument that the latter promotes the former (McAra & McVie, 2007). The narrowing impact of targets renders the category into which somebody falls more important than any action taken and the impact it has on their future behaviour. The argument can (and did in the early days of attempts to introduce the YRD and similar measures) revolve less around the effectiveness of the approach than whether it ‘counts’ towards the achievement of targets.

This is the insidious effect of targets: what gets counted counts. The overall goal might be worthwhile – who would want to argue against efforts to prevent young people being drawn into criminality? But it is rather less valuable when it triggers sleight of hand regarding the definition of an individual as a first time entrant – or not – to the criminal justice system. As with the practice of ‘stacking up’ accident & emergency patients for up to five hours in ambulances to enable casualty departments to meet targets on the time between admission and treatment (Campbell, 2008), the purpose of the whole exercise can be quickly lost. Focus on the point at which a piece of behaviour may or may not justify the attentions of the criminal justice system is important – but not simply to determine whose target the responsible individual might meet. Prevention is about the behaviour itself, rather than simply its definition – though attention to both might be mutually complementary. Senior officers in Lancashire Constabulary have indicated that preventive initiatives run by the YOS there provide community ‘alternatives’ to arrest and charge which facilitate their use in appropriate cases of informal measures (Johnson, 2010).

For similar reasons, it is unlikely that study of FTEs will provide the best means of targeting prevention. If cohorts of FTEs have identified characteristics, they are merely a watered down version of those to be found in groups of more persistent offenders. Accordingly, it might be argued that identification of “those young people most likely to offend” (YJB, 2007: 8) is not best served by assessing information on FTEs, but on more established young offenders. It is misleading to deal conceptually with FTEs as if they were this kind of a discrete group – except, perhaps in relation to specifically relevant characteristics, such as age. Every offender will be an FTE once. The more significant concern (targets or no targets) is surely with those who go on from there to offend repeatedly. They are a relatively small subset of FTEs – half of the remainder will not re-offend at all (Ministry of Justice, 2009). There is more to be gained by successfully targeting these people than the wider group who may for a variety of sometimes arbitrary reasons commit an offence liable to bring them to the attention of the authorities. This is underlined by the finding of the YJB’s evaluation of Youth Inclusion & Support Panels (YISPs) that preventive work is more effective with higher risk young people (Walker et al, 2007: 12).

In short, the targeting of prevention (whether at community or individual level) will continue to rely on deprivation and other criminogenic data – including that about offending and offenders more generally: FTE cohort information does not offer a shortcut.
In an age in which criminal justice agencies purport to have some knowledge of ‘what works’ (HMIP, 1998), they can too readily assume that these complex and sometimes arbitrary processes are tidier than they really are.

None of which is to diminish the importance of prevention, or even the possibility of making it work: evaluations of some preventative initiatives have been promising (e.g. Walker et al, 2007; Mackie et al, 2007). The ability of wide-ranging targets to inform and underpin this work effectively is more open to question however.

The place of prevention has already had a somewhat chequered history within the ten-year story so far of the new youth justice system. It was always notionally the key element, but by no means always so in practice.

The 1998 Crime & Disorder Act, which created that system sets out at Section 37: “the principal aim of the youth justice system (as) the prevention of offending by children and young persons.” As one of the first crop of managers charged with setting up a youth offending service, I regarded prevention as an important component of the task in hand. If we were to convince our partners to consider alternatives to the use of potentially draconian anti-social behaviour measures for example, we needed to play our part in providing such interventions. For my Service in the early days, this took the form of relatively small-scale outreach work conducted by youth workers under the YOS umbrella. No targets were involved, though we did consider the work capable of contributing to reductions in the reported incidence of anti-social behaviour in identified ‘hotspots’.

Different YOS’s embraced the prevention agenda with varying degrees of enthusiasm. There was always an uneasy compromise between out-and-out prevention and core statutory work in which young people were supervised because they had already offended. The emphasis at the time was more on ‘nipping youth crime in the bud’. Early offending was a trigger for a YOS assessment in order to identify the need or otherwise for intervention; in the case of Final Warnings (which typically follow a second offence), intervention was regarded as the norm (YOS’s had a target to intervene in at least 80 per cent of Final Warning cases). Though other measures cut across this, such as the introduction of the Penalty Notice for Disorder (the PND – effectively an on-the-spot-fine issued by a police officer, triggering no other formal measures or intervention) which could lead to individuals avoiding intervention that their behaviour might otherwise have triggered.

A concerted move to start ‘nipping’ before any buds in the form of official crimes had appeared was triggered in 2003 with the advent of Children’s Fund resources dedicated to youth crime prevention. In line with Government guidance (CYPU & YJB, 2002) a range of initiatives, some targeting preventive work at individuals (e.g. Youth Inclusion & Support Panels, or YISPS) and others more targeted at groups of young people in high crime locations (e.g. Youth Inclusion Projects or YIPs) were established on the back of this
funding. Inevitably, targets followed: the invention of FTEs was preceded in 2005 by a requirement for YOS’s to identify a given number of young people for preventive interventions such as YISPs and YIPs (YJB, 2005).

The vision at the time was for highly sophisticated targeting mechanisms. Huge computerised ‘Identification, Referral and Tracking’ (IRT) systems were envisaged in order to pool data held by all agencies working with children and young people aged 0-19 as a means of distilling details of candidates for preventive services (CYPU & YJB, 2002). In the event these came to little, aside from the expenditure of significant amounts of time, energy and money exploring the possibilities. It is a theme which is likely to return: the temptation of seeing prevention in terms of definitive lists of people for whom it is required is one currently seen in debates around the right approaches to be taken by initiatives to prevent violent extremism (Dodd, 2009).

This forms an interesting backdrop to consideration of the current place of prevention in the tackling of youth crime. Debate following the conviction earlier this year of two boys now aged 10 and 11 for the violent assault and torture of two younger boys in Doncaster has implied that more needs to be done in the targeted prevention of offending by young people. Dr Eileen Vizard, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist and clinical director of the NSPCC’s national child assessment and treatment service, is quoted (McVeigh, 2010) as saying:

_We need to intervene as early as we can to stand the best chance of preventing (such children) going down the wrong route._

Apparent failure to do so in this case has prompted consideration of legal action by the parents of one of the victims (Guardian, 2010).

On the other hand, the main focus of youth justice appears to be heading in the opposite direction. The dinosaur is seemingly becoming a model for work with young offenders, as YOS’s were required to implement the YJB’s ‘Scaled Approach’ from 30th November 2009. This saw – not for the first time – youth justice being led down a road already trodden by their elders in Probation. Resources are to follow risk with the intensity of YOS involvement determined by a given individual’s assessed levels of risk of re-offending or causing harm to others.

How – or even if – preventive efforts are to be reconciled with this initiative is not spelled out, but as an overall direction, it does not augur well for prevention.

Faced with tough decisions in increasingly straitened times, it is highly likely that YOS prioritisation of the higher risk end of the spectrum will be to the growing neglect of preventive work. This has been a feature of the way that the Probation Service has developed in recent years (Kemshall & Wood, 2007), so that any form of lower level prevention is now a luxury they simply cannot afford. The comprehensive approach envisioned in the new
Youth Justice system with YOS services running a spectrum from prevention through to the management of serious convicted young offenders has been a strength: they have something to offer both to those young people with whom it works, and to the local crime and disorder reduction partnerships of which they are part. Constructive approaches can be offered to the prevention and tackling of youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

In this context, it is probably no coincidence that funding for preventive work in youth justice is reducing more rapidly than overall YOS funding (Puffett, 2009). This seems a strange way to celebrate success – even the confused and possibly misleading success apparently gleaned by current preventive work.

As YOSs scale down their direct delivery of preventive initiatives, many of them are being handed over to the wider children’s services partnerships of which most YOSs are now part. It remains to be seen if this will constitute a healthy mainstreaming or a downgrading to Cinderella status for services increasingly raising thresholds to protect their ability to deliver core statutory business (Arthur, 2007).

Ironically, in this context, some mechanism might be needed to focus minds on the importance of prevention. This is the sort of justification frequently given for the use of targets. In view of some of the problems with them identified here, it is to be hoped that an alternative will be found.

**End Notes**

1. A 33% reduction is quoted for Lancashire for example (Weigh, 2009). Anecdotally it is suggested that youth court workloads have noticeably reduced.

2. Government broadly acknowledges this (HM Government, 2008) but the implication of the target could nevertheless be thought to have a simplifying effect.

3. The YOS in question have asked not to be identified here

4. FTE information was cross-referred with other data linked to risk factors for offending such as Looked After status, receipt of free school meals and a range of education-related information including educational and learning needs

5. And have continued to do so (supra).

6. In conversation a number of them have spoken about the harmful effects of unnecessarily drawing young people into the criminal justice system in a manner reminiscent of 1980’s youth justice workers.

7. Figures are not available but a good deal is being invested in the YRD: Nearly 4,000 police officers and community support officers have now been specially trained in its use across all eight of the pilots. Even before their participation in the YRD Pilot, Lancashire Constabulary averaged 241 restorative disposals per month between September 2007 and March 2008, 465 of those in that period being in the category of ‘crime’ (Fox et al, 2009).

8. Often stressed in YJB and YOS publicity - a leaflet from Bury YOS at its launch, for example, talked of “taking early action when young people show signs of getting into trouble, in an effort to nip their criminal involvement in the bud.”
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