

# The puzzles and paradoxes

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To quote Dame Gillian Pugh on child and youth policy in the UK, the last eight years have seen a 'veritable blizzard' of new initiatives and programmes in addition to Sure Start and the Children's Fund.<sup>1</sup> The outside observer is struck by the sheer amount of money being spent on what look like innovative initiatives, and this observer for one is pleased that social and criminological research has been accorded prominence in the planning of these measures. Indeed, I regard the UK as a shining beacon of hope in a world where punishment and social exclusion are more frequently the driving forces behind child and youth policy than participation, evidence-based practice, and joined-up solutions to joined-up problems.

But – there is always a 'but'. Gillian Pugh put her finger on one of the odd features of current policies when she observed that the work of the Youth Justice Board and the youth offending teams has not dovetailed well with the children and young people's agenda, 'with the YJB rolling out a range of programmes that may be successful but are not always co-ordinated with other preventive measures in local areas'. More pointedly, she asserted that the Home Office's focus on antisocial behaviour 'appears to have come from a different planet'. These comments crystallised some aspects of policy in the UK that had particularly puzzled me.

One source of perplexity is the Youth Justice Board's apparent assumption that *only* high-risk young people and their families – including those who have not yet offended but might – need to be targeted for pre-delinquency prevention; that there are a small number of key risk factors that can be used to target those at high risk; and that programmes must remain focused and of high intensity. I have heard tell of Asset assessments and linked databases, with an emphasis on identifying at-risk young people, assessing their likelihood of future offending, keeping them under various forms of monitoring or surveillance, and developing 'case notes' that follow the child through the system – and presumably through life.

This all sounds pretty intrusive to me, given that our capacity to predict the future behaviour of individuals, especially on the basis of a few key risk factors, is extremely limited. The Youth Justice Board's policies go to the heart of the debate about targeting, and about

the potential for risk factor research to be used to intensify state interference in the lives of the marginalised, pathologising nonconforming young people through risk management and selective control strategies. The new policies on antisocial behaviour, and the use of civil law for the operation of antisocial behaviour orders, also raise issues about how 'we' selectively control 'them'.

## Universal or targeted?

At the risk of some oversimplification, we may state the issues in terms of a policy choice. On the one hand we can opt for universal, empowering, non-stigmatising programmes that utilise risk factor research to improve the wellbeing of all children, *including as a by-product those most at risk*. Such universal approaches may of course also include specific provision for children with special needs, and there are often very good scientific and practical reasons for making such specific provisions. This seems to be the main philosophy of mainstream child and youth policy in the UK.

On the other hand, we can make the rather questionable jump from the identification of risk factors in longitudinal and population surveys to the identification and control of 'risky individuals', a key element of the Youth Justice Board's approach. The jump is questionable for several reasons. First, the state is much more powerful than any individual, especially if that individual is a disadvantaged young person. State power must therefore be carefully circumscribed in its application to individuals, particularly as such interventions are uncertain in their outcomes. If we were dealing with a less difficult issue such as, say, dental problems, where early identification and treatment of children at risk generally produces very good outcomes with few if any negative side effects, then targeted programmes would not be controversial. But in the realm of problem behaviours, there are many reasons why programmes for young people can backfire: there's the risk of stigmatisation, and the risk that 'deviancy training' by peers will overwhelm programme effects.<sup>2</sup>

Even when programmes do work, we are still faced with larger questions about net-widening or mesh-narrowing through the colonisation of the institutions

# of youth crime prevention

Brisbane, Australia, makes the case for non-targeted preventive programmes

of care by the institutions of regulation. Do we really want schools, for example, to become an extension of the police or the juvenile justice system through early identification, referral and surveillance of high-risk children? Would it not be preferable to have more extensive and flexible forms of family support that can work in close co-operation with the school, empowering parents or carers to do their job of parenting more effectively? Should we not be creating formal support systems to generate and strengthen informal support systems, which in turn reduce the need for formal – especially regulatory – systems?<sup>3</sup>

## The prevention paradox

Another reason why the jump from risk factors to risky people is questionable is that targeted approaches may not be the most efficient way of changing the behaviours of high-risk individuals, nor are they necessarily the best way of reducing aggregate problem behaviours. Take drinking and driving, a problem I studied in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> People with high blood-alcohol levels are much more likely to have accidents than people with lower levels, but because there are so many more people on the roads driving at low rather than high blood-alcohol levels, most alcohol-related accidents involve relatively low-risk drivers. Traditional police enforcement based on apprehending and convicting offenders has little if any deterrent effect. Yet the introduction in Australia of mass random breath-testing resulted in a large reduction in accidents across the driving population. This was because the many low-risk drivers reduced their risk levels even further (if only by a small amount), and the minority of high-risk drivers changed their behaviours, in most cases substantially reducing their risk levels.

This illustrates what some people have called the prevention paradox: a small reduction in risk amongst a large number of people at low levels of risk produces a larger population reduction in problem behaviours than large risk reductions in a small number of high-risk individuals. It also shows that universal approaches can sometimes bring about appreciable reductions in the numbers of people in the high-risk categories.

Our experience in our early intervention work in

Brisbane, which involved communication and social skills programmes for all the pre-school children in selected schools combined with various forms of family support for many of the parents – again offered in a non-targeted way – was that boys' behaviours, as rated by the teachers, improved on average in all the programme classes compared with the non-programme classes.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by the end of the pre-school year there was a reduction of about one-third in the number of boys rated as being beyond the clinical cut-off for problem behaviour.

My preference is for universal approaches in disadvantaged communities, targeting communities rather than individuals. But the appropriate balance between targeted and universal approaches is an open question in most situations, and must be determined through careful consideration of the ethical and practical issues, and through trial and error that assesses the costs and benefits. The Canadian researcher Dan Offord and his colleagues have produced a very useful paper weighing costs and benefits; their list of disadvantages that attach to individually targeted interventions is by far the longest, and in my view contains the most serious problems.<sup>6</sup> These include the problems of stigmatisation and prediction, as well as the general failure of targeted programmes to focus on the social context.

Universal programmes have the interesting advantage of being more likely to involve the middle class, increasing the chances that they will be well-run. As a result, however, they may have the greatest benefits for those who least need the input. This problem can to some extent be minimised by focusing on disadvantaged communities. All approaches have their place, all have some drawbacks, and determining the optimum mix is a complex problem that has to be assessed in context. The bottom line is to 'do no harm'.

## The poverty scandal

So what do we do with risk factors? We could do no better than to heed David Farrington's conclusions:

*The main policy implication of the Cambridge Study is that, in order to reduce offending and antisocial behaviour, early prevention experiments are needed targeting four important predictors that may be both causal and*

*modifiable: low achievement, poor parental child-rearing behaviour, impulsivity, and poverty.*<sup>7</sup>

This is a very large agenda, potentially the work of several lifetimes. While specific programmes like parent training and child social skills development underpinned by careful experimentation are a critical part of this agenda, the real challenge implicit in Farrington's words is to tackle what Keating and Hertzman have called 'modernity's paradox'.<sup>8</sup> This is the decline, at a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, in the systems of informal support and nurturing embedded in family and community that actually make human beings human.

It is a scandal – a violation of the most fundamental rights of children – that in developed countries we have not only permitted poverty to persist but to grow, and that the challenges facing even the most resourceful parents are so formidable. Increasingly our economic and social systems are geared to endless economic growth, not to a reduction in the incidence of the child physical and mental health and behavioural problems that are so much a feature of the contemporary era.<sup>9</sup>

Risk factor research is extremely useful because it points us to some of the precise characteristics of children, families, communities and institutions that are most likely implicated in juvenile crime and other problems. The challenge such research presents is to transform the ecology of human development so that the systems and social settings within which children

and young people grow up are strengthened, not undermined.

This will require far more than responses to the needs of children who have been damaged by uncaring or violent families or who have been scarred by living in disadvantaged communities – critical though such responses are. Poverty, chaotic family environments, and damaged children are the products of institutional practices and social arrangements that perpetuate and amplify inequality. Tackling this expression of modernity's paradox is, I think, what prevention is all about.<sup>10</sup>

#### References

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- 10 I would like to thank Professor Peter Crabosky of the Australian National University for very useful comments on the ideas in this paper.

