



Improving interventions to reduce violent offending by young people in New Zealand

Peter Kennedy

Introduction

Young people who commit violent offences damage their victims, the community, their families and themselves. This article summarises work undertaken by the Ministry of Justice (Crawford & Kennedy, 2008) that explored concerns around a perceived increase in the level of violent offending by young people who come into contact with the youth justice system (i.e., 14–16-year-olds) and the challenges in providing effective interventions for serious violent offenders.

Understanding trends in violent offending

Police apprehension statistics are the most readily available and widely used dataset for tracking trends in violent offending. There is nevertheless a need for caution when interpreting official statistics on youth offending, as it has long been recognised that this data is not very well suited to discerning trends. Unlike some countries, New Zealand does not yet have consistent survey data over time on self-reported violent offending by young people. Data of this type is now considered indispensable by criminologists as a means to reliably identify trends in offending.

In New Zealand, an apprehension occurs when a person has been dealt with in some manner (e.g., warning, alternative action, prosecution) to resolve an alleged offence. The perception that violent offending is increasing arises largely from the rise of apprehensions for violent offences in recent years, and from anecdotal reports. Apprehensions data, however, represent the number of apprehensions and not the number of

offenders. One offender may be apprehended for multiple offences. In addition, violent crime recorded by the Police is only a small proportion of all violent offending as represented in self-reported offending or victimisation surveys. It is important to

note that statistics are strongly influenced by changes in public reporting of crime, policing and resources, and in recording practices.

A recent Police analysis of violent offence statistics suggests that the Police have been increasingly proactive in policing the types of crime and places that are associated with violent offending. In particular, they have taken a stronger approach to enforcement against family violence and against crime in public places

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
statistics are strongly influenced by changes in public reporting of crime, policing and resources, and in recording practices
■ ■ ■ ■ ■

where alcohol is a factor. There also appears to have been a jump in the recording of violent offending in 2005. This corresponded to a change in Police data-entry technology that made it easier to record offences. All these factors will impact on the apprehension statistics, without necessarily reflecting any change in the underlying trends in violent offending.

Turning to the official New Zealand statistics, figure 1 reports police apprehension rates for violent offenders by age. It is interesting to note that the increase in apprehensions for violent offences is not confined to young people; there has been an increase amongst all groups aged from 14 to 50 over the period 1997 to 2007.

In general the proportion of apprehensions for violence attributable to 14 to 16-year-olds was

almost the same, at just under 10% of the total, in 2007 as in 1997. However, there have been increases across most classes of violent crime, with the exception of minor assaults, as shown in figure 2.

There has been a particularly strong increase in intimidation and threats, especially in more recent years. Because these represent generally minor offending, they are not the main focus of this article.

Young men, in particular Māori and Pacific males, are over-represented in apprehension statistics for violence. Female apprehension rates for some violent offences have increased faster for young women (who have lower rates of violent offending than young males) than for young men.

Figure 1: Police apprehension rate for violent offences, by age, 1997–2007 (per 10,000)

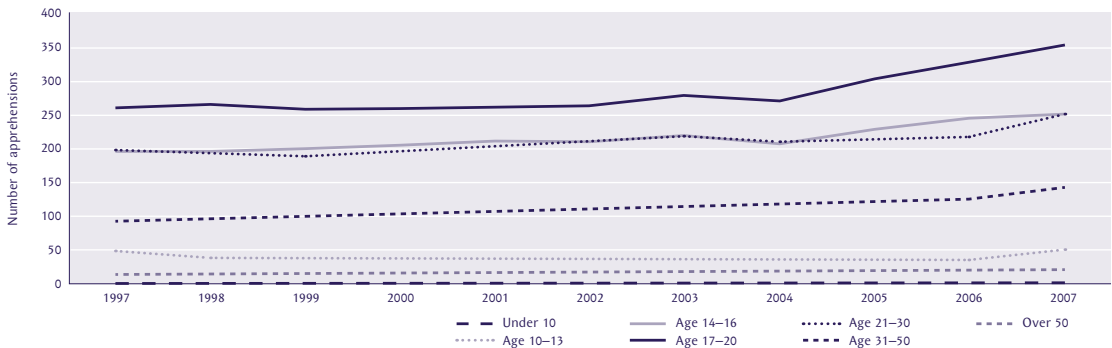
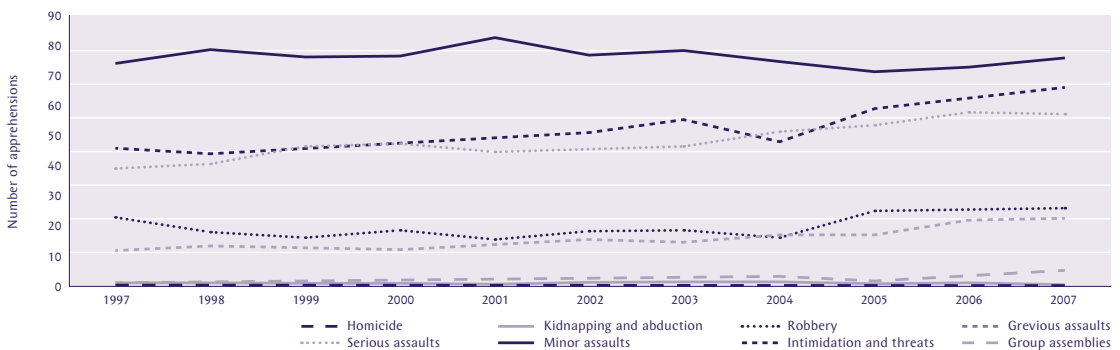


Figure 2: Police apprehension rate of 14 to 16 year olds for violence, by offence type, 1997–2007 (per 10,000)



Understanding violent offending

Violent offending peaks around ages 16 to 18 years of age. International surveys estimate that between 10 and 25% of young people aged 16 to 17 years commit at least one serious violent offence each year. As already mentioned only a small proportion of this offending comes to official notice. Serious violence is usually part of a pattern of repeated offending that includes other non-violent offences. Very few young people 'specialise' in violent offending.

Young men are more likely to offend than young women, and typically offend against other young men who are strangers or casual acquaintances, in public places. Violent offenders are more likely than other young people to be disengaged from school, to associate with antisocial peers and to misuse alcohol.

A small, mainly male, group who exhibited persistent conduct disorder during childhood account for roughly half of all self-reported serious violent offences committed by young people. The remainder are committed by a much larger group, who commence violent offending in adolescence with few early signs of behaviour problems. They tend to cease offending as they move into adulthood.

The strongest risk factors for youth violence are the commission of any sort of criminal offence during childhood, substance abuse before the age of 12 years, association with antisocial peers, detachment from school, and aggression in early adolescence. Many young people who commit violent offences have also been victims of violence themselves.

Evidence-based interventions

There are a number of general implications for interventions arising from our understanding of violent offending.

Because a wide range of evidence shows that early interventions are more effective and less costly, it is important to identify children on a life-course persistent trajectory of conduct disorder as early as possible, and to engage them and their families in programmes that can influence this trajectory. Because all such children cannot be reliably identified, interventions can only reduce (not eliminate) the risk of violent offending. Adolescent-onset violent offenders also typically show

few early signs that they will become violent offenders, and therefore a suite of interventions is needed to target violence in adolescence, as well as conduct disorder in early and middle childhood.

Interventions need to target risk factors that are amenable to change, and which have a significant cause-effect relationship with violent offending. In many cases, robust evidence is lacking and research is needed to provide confidence around cause and effect relationships. Rigorous evaluation of the outcomes of the interventions themselves is particularly important in this regard.

Programmes addressing adolescent violent offending will typically need to address other types of offending at the same time. As previously noted very few adolescent serious offenders 'specialise' in violent offences. Hence, programmes strongly focused on violence are likely to be needed for only the most serious violent offenders. In addition, programmes

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Violent offenders are more likely than other young people to be disengaged from school, to associate with antisocial peers and to misuse alcohol
■ ■ ■ ■ ■

targeted at individuals can be complemented by broader policies and programmes that reduce the prevalence of risk factors in the community, reduce tolerance for violence, and alter contexts to reduce the opportunity for violent offending.

When considering the youth justice implications arising from the research literature, it is helpful to make a distinction between interventions at the youth justice system level and at the programme level. At the system level, once a young person is apprehended for a violent offence an effective youth justice system needs to be able to:

- reliably assess the risk of further offending, including further violent offending, assigning interventions that match the risk and needs and build on the strengths of the young person
- monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions
- progressively improve the mix and quality of interventions to enhance outcomes.

Programmes to address violent and recidivist offending need to be based on the principles of effectiveness that have emerged from the literature in this area. Some of these have been mentioned above but others include:

- *criminogenic needs*: programmes need to focus on those factors that directly contribute to offending, as opposed to more distantly related causes
- *responsivity*: matching the learning styles and strategies of young people to the programme and staff working with them
- *community-based*: learning takes place in a context that is meaningful to the young person, that is close to the young person's experiences and life contexts

- *intervention modality*: programme content and methods are skills-based and focused on problem-solving with a cognitive behavioural approach. Programme interventions occur in multiple settings such as home, school and community.

Much of the published research into violent offending comes from the United States. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at Colorado University, called the Blueprints initiative, is involved in an ongoing systematic review of research into United States-based programmes that aim to reduce youth violence (Institute of Behavioral Science, no date). Programmes are classified along a

continuum from effective to ineffective according to the evaluation evidence. There are only three programmes for violent adolescents that meet the Blueprints criteria for effective programmes: Multisystemic Therapy; Functional Family Therapy and Multidimensional

Treatment Foster Care. In the United States these programmes have reduced reoffending, on average, by between 10 and 22%. The Blueprints website (<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/index.html>) also lists a large number of promising programmes that have not yet been rigorously evaluated.

Other interventions to reduce youth violence include reducing the misuse of alcohol by young people, system-oriented programmes to reduce violence in schools, increasing engagement with education and training of at-risk youth, and situational crime prevention.

New Zealand interventions

A range of initiatives are currently underway that will assist in aligning interventions to

■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Programmes addressing
adolescent violent
offending will typically
need to address other
types of offending at the
same time
■ ■ ■ ■ ■

address violent offending, and other forms of offending, with the evidence base described above. At a system level, improvements include:

- the introduction of a new Police risk-screening tool (the Youth Offending Risk Screen Tool or YORST)
- improved resourcing and focus for youth justice teams within the statutory system (Child, Youth and Family)
- the development of a research-based checklist (the Youth Offending Services Effectiveness Checklist or YOSEC) to help programme providers and funders to align youth offending services more closely with best practice
- a Youth Justice Dataset that will include data from Police, Child, Youth and Family, and the Ministry of Justice and will enable research into the progression of offenders through the youth system and into the adult system.

Well over 100 government and non-government organisations provide prevention or rehabilitation programmes for at-risk youth and/or young offenders, mostly funded by government. The strong involvement of local community in the provision of programmes is a strength of the New Zealand youth justice system. However, while many programmes aim to reduce offending, robust evidence of their effectiveness is often not available. It would be valuable to capture more information on outcomes to improve services and the effectiveness of the youth justice system as a whole.

In New Zealand, there are two small-scale programmes designed to closely align with the evidence for effective therapeutic interventions, and targeted at recidivist and violent youth offenders: the Reducing Youth Offending Programme (RYOP) for 10 to 16-year-olds in

Auckland, and the Te Hurihanga programme for 14 to 17-year-olds in Hamilton. Both programmes use Multisystemic Therapy. The Te Hurihanga programme evaluation will be completed in 2010, but interim results from the RYOP evaluation show that it has had a positive effect on the young participants, most of whom were Māori or Pacific young people (Grace, McLean & Warren, 2006). The rates of reoffending are reduced both with respect to serious offending and overall offending.

New Zealand programmes for adolescent sex offenders appear to be very effective in reducing

sexual reoffending amongst those who complete the programmes (Lambie, 2007).

New Zealand has a range of current or proposed initiatives aimed at reducing harm from alcohol use, reducing violence in schools, increasing school engagement, reducing youth

involvement in gangs and associated criminal activity, and at situational crime prevention. These initiatives are likely to be reducing the incidence of serious youth violence. It is difficult, however, to precisely measure their effect, because they are complex in design, they are often indirect in their influence on violence, and their effect is difficult to separate from other influences.

Future directions

On the basis of the evidence and a review of current interventions, the most promising future direction for reliably reducing serious violent offending by young people in New Zealand appear to be:

- addressing the risk factors that are the precursors of violence, particularly through early interventions targeted at children with

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The strong involvement
of local community in the
provision of programmes
is a strength of the
New Zealand youth
justice system

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

persistent conduct disorder, as envisaged in the implementation of the *Inter-agency Plan for Conduct Disorder/Severe Antisocial Behaviour 2007–2012* (MSD, 2007)

- completing to a high standard the current initiatives underway to improve the capability and responsiveness of the youth justice system
- developing a management information system to gather and disseminate timely information on available interventions and the outcomes of those interventions, to enable systematic improvement of the quality and mix of interventions
- carefully trialling and expanding programmes that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing violent, recidivist offending
- ensuring that interventions involve Māori in their design, development and implementation, and that resources are used in partnership with local communities (whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori communities) to learn from and build on success
- addressing the contextual, or community, risk factors associated with violence such as alcohol misuse by young people.

Conclusions

Given the police apprehension data is not particularly well suited to discerning trends, understanding violent offending by young people in New Zealand presents many challenges. That said, the evidence base for youth offending both in New Zealand and overseas is developing, and there are promising programmes that provide potential for the effective reduction of violent youth offending.

REFERENCES

- Crawford, R., & Kennedy, P. (2008). *Improving Interventions to Reduce Violent Offending by Young People in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Justice.
- Grace, R., McLean, A., & Warren, J. (2006). *An Evaluation of the Reducing Youth Offending Programme*. Wellington: Child, Youth and Family and Department of Corrections.
- Institute of Behavioral Science (no date). *Blueprints for Violence*. Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado. Retrieved in February 2009 from <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/>.
- Lambie, I. (2007). *Getting it right: An evaluation of New Zealand community treatment programmes for adolescents who sexually offend. Ka pu te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi. Summary report*. Wellington: Centre for Social Research and Evaluation, Ministry of Social Development.
- Ministry of Social Development (2007). *Inter-agency Plan for Conduct Disorder/Severe Antisocial Behaviour 2007–2012*. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development.



Peter Kennedy is a Principal Advisor in the Ministry of Justice, who works mostly on youth justice policy. He is a member of the Youth Justice Leadership Group. Peter's original training was in social work.