

# Public health and youth offending

Catherine Heffernan looks at the relationships between health and youth offending. Are young people at greatest risk of poor health more likely to offend?

**M**y first involvement with youth offending services was when as I was asked to represent the local health services on my local Youth Offending Services Management Board. This was in April of this year and since then, I have been interviewed as part of a Care Quality Commission inspection regarding the contribution of health services to youth offending services.

As a public health doctor, youth offending services is uncharted territory. Public health literature on ill health and youth crime is relatively limited and it does not naturally form part of the public health consultant's work portfolio. It is however an exciting opportunity to work more closely with local authorities and demonstrate the applicability of public health knowledge and skills to improving health and social outcomes for young people who offend.

Public health work can help to instigate early intervention before a health problem results in a crime

The relationship between health and offending is complex. On one level, ill health and the propensity to commit an offence can be present in the same population but are unlinked, except that they share the same causal factors. In other words, poverty, unemployment, poor housing can result in poor diet, dental health, malnutrition or obesity, higher rates of smoking and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse. At the same time, these casual or 'upstream' factors can also result in poor educational attainment, increased truancy from school and increased likelihood of offending. Public health can act on this level to prevent offending and reduce ill-health by tackling the wider social and health inequalities with partners.

Then there is a second level, whereby there are incidences of overlapping behaviours. For instance, poor parental supervision, truancy or exclusion from school is associated with anti-social behaviour as well as alcohol misuse and early onset of drug use. A higher concentration of risk factors amongst serious or persistent young offenders increases the likelihood that the group will develop drugs or alcohol misuse. At this level, work can be done with youth offenders in preventing progression to alcohol or drugs dependency.

The third level comprises of specific health issues that are directly linked to youth offending, such as adverse mental health and substance misuse. Drugs use or mental health problems (for example, behavioural disorders) may lead young people to commit an offence. Public health work here is twofold – helping to instigate early intervention before a health problem results in a crime and helping to set up systems whereby youth offenders receive the care they need to overcome their mental health problems or substance misuse.

So where do I start? Like all good budding public health entrepreneurs, I am doing a health

needs assessment of the users of youth offending services. This will include a statistical analysis of the population such as demographics, health problems and other relevant issues. It also includes a service review, stakeholder input, user group consultation and a review of the evidence on what works and does not work. This assessment should highlight gaps in services and recommendations on how to address these gaps so that they meet the needs of the population. At the same time, I can use my overall strategic understanding of how health needs of young people who use the youth offending services feed into wider health agencies such as teenage pregnancy. There is also an opportunity to provide reports to key decision makers on how the health of children and young people impacts on their propensity to offend or reoffend. Moreover, I can use my partnership skills to ensure that where health services are not addressing young offenders' needs, I can facilitate the decision making to change that.

Working with youth offending services is an exciting and daunting task. This is uncharted waters for me but I hope I will do an adequate job of mapping a course for others to follow.

