

CELCIS REACH: In conversation with Fiona Dyer, the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice talks

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What are the most common misconceptions about young people in the justice system?

I think the most common misconception about young people who offend is that they're bad or they are criminal and that there's just no hope. And I think for the majority of young people who are involved in offending, they are doing so a result of trauma they have experienced and their young lives. We know a lot from research on adverse childhood experiences and through additional research that young people who offend can have the experience of abuse, whether that's physical or sexual, through witnessing domestic violence, through neglect, through parental substance misuse, mental health, bereavement, loss - the list goes on and on - and a lot of that is portrayed in young people's behaviour. For boys that's normally external through being violent towards others and in girls that can be internalized through self-harm. Obviously, there are exceptions to that rule, but the majority of young people who offend have been victims first. From our IVY service which is Interventions for Vulnerable Youth, we have found that from 200 young people who have been referred from thirty-one local authorities, the majority had been a victim themselves and that's what's led to their behaviour. So, I think what we need to do is look at how the systems support young people, look at how they label them, what language is used and ultimately treat these young people as children and always think that there is hope that they will change their behaviour.

What are the issues with stigma and young people that have been through the justice system?

I think in young people who offend have a lot of stigma attached to them. I think they are treated very differently from other young people with similar needs. I think we are creating a system of deserving and undeserving young people. As soon as a young person offends, they're

suddenly put into a different system they're treated differently, and they are given this label and negative language and the stigma attached to that. So, I think we really need to address that or we're just going to continue the cycle. Young people who are given negative labels such as 'self-fulfilling prophecy', we know from labelling literature that if you give something a negative label like being an outsider, they will act up to that and their behaviour will intensify and then systems will respond by putting in an intervention and the negative label just gets worse, and the cycle just continues. So, I think we need to address that. Young people will make mistakes - their brain is not fully developed until they're in their mid-twenties - and the risk-taking part of the brain is the last to fully develop, so we need to expect that young people are going to make mistakes. They also don't really understand the justice system and consequences of offending and I think that's important to understand. It's a complicated system even for the people and professionals who work in the system to understand, never mind young people. What is an offence? What is not an offence? What can be the consequences of that behaviour? And I think as professionals need to help young people through general prevention to understand that, but not label them or put a stigma on them as being offenders.

What can be done about it?

We need to change. We need to change attitudes in society. We need to change the language; we need to stop having language that young people are unmanageable. These are children. Childhood is a time for pushing boundaries and for testing. [The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime](#) has told us that 95% of young people have admitted to committing an offence. We know that, so we know that it's a time where young people should be allowed and be supported to make mistakes, but there's not going to be lifelong impact on them. There's a lot of positives, as I said, in the policy changing and we need to remember that, that we're living in a different type of Scotland just now where the government policies are supportive of young people. So, we need to just enrich that and make sure that's put into practice.

I've recently written a paper for Social Work Scotland on 50 years of Social Work and it's just great to think that the philosophy of Kilbrandon, of treating the needs and not the deeds of the child is still within our Children's Hearing System and it's something that we need to remember in Scotland today.

What does the future look like?

Ironically bringing young people into youth justice systems can actually be more detrimental. It's really hard for young people to leave formal systems once they are in them. From research we know we should be looking at diversionary measures for young people. A lot of young people involved in offending, as I've said, have been victims themselves. They come from deprived backgrounds where if we could intervene early to stop deprivation, to stop poverty, and to ultimately stop any abuse from occurring that would be the ideal. But we don't want to stigmatize young people further by intervening in all these families, so what we need to do is look at the strengths of young people and the strengths of families and do things through more youth work, where we support in all victims and not labelling those as offending victims. That would actually be more positive - building on the strengths instead of having that stigma, that label or that perception of them being bad or criminal and leading that support through that route.

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