



Violent crime by young people in a Greater Manchester Youth Justice Service- to what extent is it instrumental?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The Greater Manchester Youth Justice Services (GMYJS) work with young people who have offended or are at risk of offending. This research was conducted in a GMYJS which experiences higher levels of violence against the person in contrast to any other offence. A comment was made at the time of the 2014 inspection of this GMYJS that violent offending there appeared to be marked by a relatively high level of instrumental as opposed to expressive violence.

The student attended once a week at this GMYJS where she began to assess the distinction between instrumental and expressive violence. After several meetings with the YJ manager, the following areas were in need of further research:

- To identify the trigger factors young people undergo before acting violently, and how they can be reduced to prevent further violence;
- To consider the ratio of young people acting violently under the influence of alcohol, as opposed to those who were sober;
- Finally, to evaluate the level of violence in this region and assess whether young people retain high or low instrumental tendencies.

Research Methods

A mixed method approach was used for this research, although it was predominantly qualitative data that was utilised. The approach was as follows:

- Quantitative data regarding all youth violent offences in the chosen GMYJS over the last three years;
- An examination of a sample of fifty Assets relating to violent offences to assess what they revealed about the nature of violence used;
- Three interviews with young people and observation of two sessions with young people with whom the YJS are working.

Key literature

This research highlights the ambiguity between instrumental and expressive violence, suggesting the distinction is not as clear-cut as first thought. Violence is deemed instrumental when it is goal-focused, planned behaviour according to Flight and Forth's (2007) definition. This contrasts with Block and Christakos' (1995) definition on expressive behaviour: involving violent outbursts of impulsive, unplanned acts of anger that stem from a loss of control. Previous scholars believed there was a clear distinction between the two levels of violence; this has been subject to criticism in more recent years.

Another key piece of literature concerns alcohol related violence, which has been raised as a concern in the chosen GMYJS. Young people consume large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis, which increases the likelihood of violence depending on a young person's socioeconomic factors (Richardson and Budd, 2003). Furthering this, alcohol consumption is commonly visible within relationships where domestic violence is present, as observed in a study by Gilchrist et al (2003). Additional literature concerning female violence and young people's relationship to violence is documented throughout my findings and analysis. Alongside, an in-depth debate differentiating the instrumental/expressive distinction.

Key findings

Statistics over a three-year period showed that violence against the person is the most common offence among young people in this GMYJS. In 2014, this region saw an increase in the offence of 'possession of a bladed article or weapon'; this was accompanied by only a slight increase in robbery offences and no firm conclusions can be drawn as to whether or not this trend indicates any increase in the instrumental use of violence.

It proved difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the evaluation of Assets, due to the limited amount of information per profile and the ambiguity between expressive and instrumental violence referred to above. However there were statements consistent with the instrumental use of violence in seventy per cent of the sample of Assets.

The ambiguity between instrumental and expressive behaviour also emerged in interviews. The sample interviewed expressed both instrumental and expressive traits at different points throughout their offence history. For expressive behaviour, different triggers were identified prior to becoming angry, which can be dealt with to prevent being violent. Instrumental behaviour was also described, highlighting premeditated violence that can stem from provocation or peer influence. However, debate remains regarding weaponry, suggesting it could be labelled instrumental or expressive, as the final goal is to cause the maximum level of pain; a judgement about the nature of such violence requires knowledge of the young person's thinking and intentions at the start of the incident

Interviewees confirmed that alcohol consumption increased their desire to be violent, portraying evidence of a loss of control (expressive). However, continuous expressive violence, under the influence of alcohol over a period of time shows signs of instrumental behaviour. Drug misuse was evident amongst my research, however the association drawn here with violent offending tended to relate to an instrumental intention to obtain money to pay off drug debt and not to intoxication.



Overall, while no unequivocal outcome can be claimed for this research, findings were consistent with a higher level of instrumental than expressive violence amongst young people with whom this GMYJS is involved. It is not known how far this is consistent with young people elsewhere.

Policy implications

Interventions developed by this GMYJS to respond to violent offending need to take account of what appears to be a relatively high proportion of instrumental violence used by young people.

The question of the nature of violent offending by young people merits further exploration. This would be assisted by identifying a way at the assessment stage of more clearly demarcating instrumental from expressive violence to inform further study. Assessment of how the nature of violence employed by young people in this region compares to those elsewhere would also be instructive.