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Youth Offending Teams

An offender, or a person who has committed a crime, does not have a certain age. The associative perception might portray an adult or a teenager, but it is less inclined to consider a 10-year-old child involved in manifesting criminal behavior. Various countries do not have law systems that can punish a child as they would an adult who has committed the same crime. Relative impunity or mild punishment cannot guarantee that a child will not repeat a crime in the future. On the part of the Youth Offending Teams' work, comprehensive education and engagement in various types of activities focused on reducing the risk to offend or re-offend also cannot provide such promises to protect the public. Nevertheless, these activities can analyze the environment and accompanying factors, and address the primary reasons for criminal behavior.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) have appeared recently. They are common in England and Wales, and their working principles and activities are developing and improving owing to constant inspections. YOTs emerged on the verge of debates discussing that children should be punished if they were proven to know what they did and after 1998, the year when two 11-year-old boys had murdered a toddler (East para. 8). The Crime and Disorder Act has eliminated the principle that a child cannot commit a crime and emphasized the need to address the potential risk. Consequently, YOTs work with 10- to 18-year-old children who were either sentenced or noticed by police but not brought to court ("The Work of Youth..." 6).

Additionally, official websites encourage family members and teachers to contact the YOTs representatives if they suspect that a child is inclined to criminal behavior.

The YOTs' organization and activity are flexible because they work with individuals and they have to consider various factors before designing intervention programs. Supposedly, the only common thing in their work is the guidance that assists in classifying the level of risk that a young offender can pose to the community. The four levels of risks are as follows:

- 1) low risk, which means that a YOT has not found evidence that a child would have dangerous behavior;
- 2) medium risk, which means that a YOT has found some disturbing factors, yet they would not lead to dangerous behavior unless circumstances change;
- 3) high risk, which means that a YOT has defined a child inclined to dangerous behavior that could manifest itself at any time;
- 4) very high risk, which coincides with the previous level but can result in serious injuries (including murder) as soon as a young offender has an opportunity (“The Work of Youth...” 7)

The risk level determination is necessary because a YOT can understand with whom they should work in the first place, how to develop the intervention, and/or how to strengthen the supervision to protect the community and address a young offender's needs.

In 2017, HM Inspector Bob Smith wrote in his report that he and his team analyzed 115 cases of individuals who had already committed a crime (and were sentenced to court) to understand whether YOTs responded effectively and how their work could be improved. This report also provides generalized information about YOTs work and the prevailing trends among

young offenders. Inspectors found that most of the offenders suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and other types of psychological trauma; thus, YOTs should know how to define common symptoms and refer to professionals who can assist in establishing contact (“The Work of Youth...” 17). Another trend among young offenders is using social media for communication with gang members or online violence. YOTs workers still have to develop strategies and appropriate interventions, but they succeed in investigating popular applications and widespread slang and abbreviations (“The Work of Youth...” 19). Additionally, YOTs focus on changing an offender’s behavior, understanding the background and circumstances to know how to motivate or engage an individual to work on self-improvement.

Young offenders might not be taken to court if they accept responsibility and their crime was not serious, but they still need help from YOTs. Mostly, police officers deliver out-of-court cases to local YOTs, participate in joint panel discussions, and inform about necessary out-of-court details (“Out-of-court Disposal...” 9). For example, considering the circumstances, abusive behavior might not be regarded as a court case, but a YOT needs to know when a child received resolution and what factors can be influential. If a child is a part of a group where similar behavior was noticed, a YOT can develop a behavior modeling intervention program that will also engage other members (“Out-of-court Disposal...” 20). At the same time, YOTs not only work with young offenders or potential offenders but also establish contact with victims. An inspection that had been conducted in 2018, found that some YOTs workers tried to engage victims to discuss possible interventions and become a part of the restorative justice system (“Out-of-court Disposal...” 27). Since the practice is in the initial stage of its application, not all YOTs know how to use it effectively, but it can contribute to criminal behavior prevention.

The inspection of YOTs is necessary to understand whether they contribute to the decline of crimes committed by young offenders; it also can reveal problematic issues and lead to recommendations YOTs should consider in the future. In 2018, a Wales inspection found that the number of young people whom courts referred to YOTs have decreased, but they still represent half of all cases, and mostly all of the young offenders have complex problems, which workers have managed to cover (“The Quality...” 3). The significant part of behavior modeling programs relates to the effective improvement of soft skills. In Wales, most YOTs work carefully with social skills and self-confidence; additionally, they practice engagement in the understanding of crime's consequences, but they lack the means of tracking progress (“The Quality...” 11-12). In individual cases, YOTs expand their activities and help young offenders with education with a focus on literacy and numeracy skills. However, the main problem of YOTs narrows to their “young age” and activity which means that not all of them can assess a case effectively, access required materials, and address all the factors that have caused criminal behavior.

Overall, one should not consider YOTs as a panacea for children who have committed crimes or are prone to it. Nevertheless, such agencies should be present beyond England and Wales because YOTs workers develop an individual approach to each child instead of subjecting young offenders to general punishments or warnings. They evaluate the level of danger a young offender poses to the public, consider all possible factors, work with a risk group (if a young offender is its member), improve soft skills, and provide individual assistance with education if necessary. Also, relatives, friends, or schools can contact a local YOT if they suspect that a child has criminal behavior; thus, it is possible to prevent irreversible action and reduce crime rates among children.

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