

From boot camps to dancing shoes

NPC's forthcoming research into youth offending argues that charities are a vital source of innovation in a sector averse to risk.

In the late 1990s, the teenagers of Cotgrave were getting into trouble. The small, ex-mining town in Nottinghamshire had problems with anti-social behaviour and bike thefts, with teenagers riding motorbikes dangerously around the woods and streets. The area was seen as rough, the boys had a bad reputation in local schools, and the worst were in and out of prison.

Today, these problems have virtually disappeared. The brain-child of a group of 12 year olds, a small charity called Rev and Go was set up enabling young people to ride and maintain off-road bikes at local tracks, in exchange for a contract of good behaviour and abstinence from vehicle crime. Led only by volunteers, the teenagers have been responsible for the group from the start: they decide membership by a code of good behaviour (barring those that bring drink or drugs), maintain the bikes ready for racing and gain qualifications in mechanics. The local police and youth service say it is responsible for dramatic reductions in the joy-riding and anti-social behaviour that had plagued the area.

If you have a problem with joy-riding, it's not obvious that the solution is to give teenagers motorbikes and let them decide the rules. But then it's probably also not obvious that young offenders could be reformed by dance lessons, gang members by boxing clubs or that bad behaviour might be improved by a change of diet. There is a certain 'common sense' about what young people involved in crime need—old fashioned discipline, boot-camps and curfews, and if necessary, the 'short, sharp shocks' of prison.

NPC has been researching the issue of youth offending over the last six months, and one thing we have learnt is that many 'common sense' approaches do not work. Boot camps, curfews and custody may pass the infamous 'public acceptability test', but there is little evidence that they prevent crime or reform character. Three in four young people in prison re-offend within a year of release, at vast expense to the taxpayer. Curfews lead to arrests when they are broken—extending the criminal record and drawing young people further into the criminal justice system. In fact, what intuitively might seem a sensible idea for reducing crime can actually



Rev and Go

increase it. Programmes taking delinquent young people on organised prison visits—presumably to show them how grim it is and deter them from a life of crime—show that offending actually *increases* among participants. Military-style boot camps for young offenders were stopped in the late 90's because regimental drill did nothing to reduce criminality and participants became more badly behaved.

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So what does work in preventing youth crime? There are no easy answers, but many informal and less conventional approaches are extremely promising and deserve proper attention. There are numerous examples of charities testing new approaches—using everything from arts to sport, literacy to nutrition, therapy to fostering—in many cases with great success. For example, Dance United provides an intensive,

12-week programme in which young offenders are treated as trainee professional dancers who must adhere to a number of strict principles and routines. The curriculum not only teaches them dance, discipline and public performance, it also develops their literacy, numeracy and social skills. And its results are impressive: four in five go on to education, employment or training, and less than a third of those who engage re-offend—results that are much better than for those on community orders.

The problem is, dance just doesn't *sound* very 'tough', and many charities using alternative approaches struggle for funding from government, and sometimes for credibility and access to working with young offenders. In a sector averse to risk, fearful of tabloids, and concerned to look 'tough' on crime, the voluntary sector has a particularly important role, and donors can ensure that innovation and effectiveness are not stifled by a sense of what is 'publicly acceptable'.

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NPC will publish research on charities working with young offenders in early 2010.