End of Award Report: Summary

This report summarises the main findings from a new study of the experiences of young offenders caught up in the youth justice system. The project was split into two parts: (i) a literature review; and (ii) a qualitative empirical study consisting of interviews with 37 young offenders from four separate Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), interviews with their youth justice professionals and examination of their case files.

Literature review

The literature review demonstrated the limited material and varied content of existing work in this area. A total of 89 articles, reports and other relevant pieces were located, through a systematic strategy incorporating electronic and hand searching methods. Few rigorously conducted empirical studies on the topic existed. Only very recently has there been a growing interest in highlighting the issues considered important by the young people themselves, and no recent studies were found covering the full range of criminal justice experiences. While the literature review was important in its own right, it also thus highlighted the specific contribution that this current study could make to the field.

However, some clear themes concerning young offenders' perceptions and experiences did emerge from the studies that have been undertaken to date. The report described these under four separate headings relating to different parts of the youth justice process; police, legal proceedings, custody and community disposals. Generally, studies have demonstrated among young offenders a clear lack of understanding of the system and of what is happening to them. There was also some limited evidence of stress caused by events that were part of the normal process.

Identifying young offenders interpretations of the youth justice system

Analysis of the qualitative interviews undertaken with 37 young offenders allowed us to clarify key elements of their experiences at different points within the youth justice system, from their own perspective, and thus to add to and extend existing research in this area. The research design also allowed us to compare these accounts and interpretations with those of the adults responsible for taking them through the process.

Overall, while offenders viewed their criminality as a rational choice, they underestimated its seriousness and the likely consequences, and developed a sense of learned helplessness as the system took action. According to their own accounts, they soon began to realise what was expected of them, and to assume the right attitude and conform to a relatively submissive role. Professionals tended not to show recognition of
difference between superficial co-operation and any deeper engagement with the system. Proceedings in court were found to be very confusing, and without any other framework the young offenders tended to interpret things that happened to them in these settings as the impact of their relationships with the adult professionals, rather than as necessary legal events. Disposals were understood as punitive, but while they did understand the aim to prevent reoffending, young offenders were often unclear as to how the disposal was intended to achieve this.

**Young offenders feelings and experiences**

In this section of the report we moved on to look at how young offenders felt about their interactions with people in different elements of the system. Offenders took issue with what they saw as the attitude of most (not all) police officers towards them, and the interviews allowed us to provide more detail on the components and complexity of these views than is usually achieved. Time in police cells provoked boredom, frustration and anxiety, and police interviews could be verbally and physically intimidating. As a result young people felt they lost control over what they were saying. Feelings of intimidation and isolation were heightened by court experiences, and delays contributed further to distress and anxiety. Lawyers were generally perceived to be supportive, but the role of parents was more complicated, provoking negative as well as positive reactions on the part of the young people.

Not surprisingly, a sentence of custody was always a negative experience, although offenders stressed the some positive aspects of relationships within custody. After release, they recounted disorientation and difficulties settling back into normal life. Community sentences were not considered a 'soft option' for various reasons, and YOT staff were often recounted to provide particularly valued support.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Accounts of contradictions and misinterpretation between the perceptions of young offenders compared with those of the youth justice system practitioners cut to the crux of the functioning of the youth justice system. The interviews unveiled high levels of confusion, isolation and resentment, none of which provide a useful basis for changing behaviour among young offenders. While they started out feeling in control of their actions, accounts of young offenders became striking in their lack of 'agency'. Giving in, submitting, becoming marginalised and losing power were central themes, quite contrary to the assumption of responsibility that the system hopes to achieve. In the final section, we drew together these themes within a general model of power imbalances experienced in the criminal justice system, and suggested that in order to maximise the chance for engagement with the young offenders, policy needs to address the marginalisation of young offenders in an unfamiliar adult system. We presented a three-stage model in which to frame policy development towards ensuring that young offenders can engage properly in a way that maximises the learning opportunity, in accordance with the aims of the youth justice system.