

On our side?

Young people and the police:
Can the police and crime commissioners lead the way for change?

Key points

- The Howard League U R Boss project supports young people in the criminal justice system. We have worked with young people across the country who have had varying levels of contact with the police.
- U R Boss has highlighted a number of serious concerns about the police. Some young people feel that the police do not care about young people and some experience racism or serious bad practice. Young people are also concerned about being identified as 'the usual suspects' and experience intrusive stop and search practices.
- We want to improve interactions between young people and the police, built on a base of mutual respect. Key to improving relationships is the need for regular and meaningful engagement with young people.
- The landscape for policing is changing dramatically with the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). This is a unique opportunity to make sure community voices, especially those of young people in contact with the criminal justice system, are heard, listened to and acted on.
- We are asking local PCC candidates to commit to our campaign pledge to consult with young people in contact with the criminal justice system when developing their police and crime plans.

Young people and the police: can the police and

What are we doing?

For the first time ever the government is introducing elected officials, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), to be the voice of the people and hold police forces to account. Elections will take place across the 41 police force areas in England and Wales outside London on 15 November 2012 to appoint PCCs in each police force.

Successful candidates will need to set out five year police and crime plans that determine local policing priorities. We want PCC candidates to pledge that they will consult with young people when they develop these plans and run a clean campaign that avoids stigmatising young people. It is vital that no young person is forgotten and that every effort is made to consult with young people in the criminal justice system as well.

We are asking local PCC candidates to sign a campaign pledge:

I will run a clean campaign, which avoids stereotyping or using negative language about young people. If elected, I will consult young people when developing my police and crime plan, especially those with direct experience of the criminal justice system.

After the elections we will offer to work with successful candidates to develop meaningful ways of consulting young people and embed good practice in policing.

What have young people told us?

In 2009 the Howard League launched U R Boss, a national participation project for children and young people in contact with the criminal

justice system funded by the Big Lottery. We believe young people are the experts in their own experiences; we support them to secure their legal rights and to have an impact on policy, practice and the services that support them. The over-riding issue raised by young people working with us is the quality and purpose of police contact: some 92 per cent of comments regarding perceptions and experiences of the police are negative.

We have worked with young people across the country who have had varying levels of contact with the police. Participation work has been carried out with young people's community groups, youth offending teams (YOTs) and young people who are currently or have been in prison. There are four key areas of concern across all the young people we have worked with.

1. Quality of relationships

The police are seen as not caring about or respecting young people.

"They have no respect for us, so we have no respect for them." Young man, 16

"They need knowledge of that area so maybe before they join they should have to do youth or community work in that area. Then they may understand the problems that people face and not just judge on people's actions." Young person, 13

2. The 'usual suspects'

Young people felt that once they had been in contact with the police they became labelled as the 'usual suspects'. Young people then said they felt targeted and harassed.

crime commissioners lead the way for change?

"Once you have a record everything is against you, can't get a job, go to college, the police always try to get you back into trouble by stopping you and want you to react so they can put something else on you. They never forget who you are and just harass you." Young person, 18

3. Racism and stop and search

The cloud of institutionalised racism has hung over the police for many years. In spite of some progress, it is hard to counter that people of BME origin have more negative experiences. A black person is now 30 times more likely to be stopped and searched than a white person (Townsend, 2012) and allegations of racism against the police have doubled in the last 10 years (Brady, 2012).

"They are racist. Look how many times do we get stopped? If we were white in Richmond they wouldn't trouble us but they see us and think we must be up to something all the time. I've never robbed anyone or sold drugs but they act like I'm some big gangster." Young man, 15

"Sometimes they will search us but our white friend with us will not get searched or treated in the same way." Young man

4. Extreme examples of bad practice

The blame for such practices, which have been corroborated by other professionals the Howard

League has spoken with, may be due to a few rogue officers, but they must be rooted out and investigated as they discredit whole police forces.

"They take you on a half hour trip before they take you to a station and batter you; they do it with a wet towel so that it doesn't mark." Young man, 18

"They strip-searched me in the back of a wagon with the doors wide open so everyone could see." Young man, 17

Why are we doing it?

We want to improve the purpose and quality of interactions between young people and the police, built on a base of mutual respect. As gatekeepers for much of the criminal justice system, the police occupy a unique position to use their discretion, innovation and intelligence-led policing to use a more direct and proportionate response. The policing of young people has seen some positive change in recent years, in particular around the rate of arrests as police forces have moved away from the target-driven policing culture of the centralised years.

This target culture was perhaps most evident when the 'offences brought to justice' target was being used between 2002 and 2007. There is evidence that police activity focused on the 'low hanging fruit' and that police activity was disproportionately focused on the very youngest age groups: at its high point in 2007 over 240,000 young people were sanctioned (Newburn, 2011). This coincides with the child prison population increasing to over 3,000 in 2007. Since the targets have been dropped there has been a substantial decline in the number of children in custody from those record highs by nearly half.

PCCs can build upon this progress by encouraging innovative and flexible policing, moving away from what Professor Ian Loader

has described as the 'political arms race' on custody and punishment which has resulted in young people being criminalised rather than supported or educated (Police Foundation, 2010). Young people must be listened to in order to restore trust and improve practices.

The RSA has produced research (2012) that substantiates young people's perceptions of being labelled and victimised. Their report concludes that the Police Service has experienced years of target culture, which, combined with strict adherence to protocol, rank structure, and risk aversion encourages 'group think' that has a detrimental effect on the relationship between young people and the police.

A time of austerity and forces facing cuts to their budgets offers an opportunity to reassess the most effective way that resources can be used. Police budgets are set to be reduced dramatically by a projected 20 per cent by 2015 (HM Treasury, 2010), whilst it is estimated that preventing just one in ten children from ending up in custody would save over £100 million a year (Audit Commission, 2004).

Case study: Triage and community resolution – Northumbria Police

Northumbria Police have committed to working in partnership with other services to reduce both unnecessary arrests and otherwise first time entrants to the youth justice system.

All officers have had training on community resolution and this is now fully integrated into force procedures and protocols. In addition, a triage approach operates in all Northumbria custody suits for child arrests. Here youth offending service (YOS) based police officers review all young people bailed for 'youth surgeries' and, where appropriate, ensure a restorative justice approach is undertaken rather than a reprimand/warning. This system also allows interventions and referrals to appropriate pathways to be proactively considered at an early stage.

Development work is now being undertaken with the YOS in Newcastle where all community resolutions involving a young person are assessed for their suitability for additional positive interventions.

The use of triage and community resolution has dramatically cut arrests of girls from 5,100 in 2006 to 1,863 in 2011 – a total reduction of 63 per cent. In the same period, the arrest rate of boys has fallen by 55 per cent.

Conclusion

Constant, active engagement with young people, including those in contact with the criminal justice system, is the foundation for success in diverting young people to positive futures and creating safer communities. PCCs have an opportunity to engage with, listen to and implement solutions from young people themselves.

References

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For more information on the campaign and a full briefing on what young people have told us visit urboss.org.uk

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