

# ***Desistance and marginalised young people***

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# Methodology

- Two longitudinal studies of young people aged between 16-25 years old.
- **Study 1:** 18 Interviews with 5 young people over 18 months who were trying to stop offending in the community and were leaving support services.
- **Study 2:** At least 3 interviews each with over 50 men over 2 years tracking progress before, during and after leaving prison. Follow up study with nine young men over seven years.
- Grounded theory.

# Limitations

- There is only one woman in these samples.
- This research is reliant on what young people are willing to report or be able to 'tell it like it is.'
- These groups are relatively small.

# Study I: Includem

- Worked with over 500 of the most vulnerable young people in Scotland.
- Their transitional support service is unique - works with those aged between 16 and 24 years.
- The importance of the relationship between the worker and service user (McNeill et al. 2005).

# Study II: Moving On Scotland

- Between April 2013 and 2016, worked with 263 young people from Inverclyde, East Ayrshire, Renfrewshire and the Highlands aged up to 21.
- 13% (n=32) engaged in the community returned to prison for a new conviction (2yrs) compared to national average of 47% (1yr).
- Mentors build a relationships with the person prior to them leaving prison, through the gate if and thereafter. A case file analysis showed that support was generally required for around two years upon liberation.

# A specific population requiring a special approach

Growing recognition that young adults, those aged 16-25 require a specific response because of this stage of their life, immaturity and also malleability (Prince's Trust, 2015; Losel, 2011).

We treat them as adults and they often tell us that they are used to services speaking down to them and treating them like children. There may be times when they have acted childishly but we have seen ourselves when acting as advocates that services do look down on them more than often.' (Mentor, Moving On).

# Research Questions

- Why did these young people become involved in territorial gangs?
- What helped them to take the first steps towards desistance?
- What challenges did they face?
- What helped?

# Literature on Contemporary Transitions to Adulthood

- Arnett (2006) '**Emerging adulthood**', time of hope, discovery and choice.
- **BUT...**
- Jones (2002) those who are poor have **accelerated transitions** reflecting continuing outcomes of structural inequality rather than personal agency and choice.
- The Precariat (Standing, 2011)



# Overview of the Young People-revealing hidden harms

- Fathers generally absent.
- Lack of love.
- Many had experience of been 'looked after'
- Childhoods were far from carefree. 'Heavy hard.'
- Some had suffered abuse. In *Moving On*, three young men only revealed this three years into them being interviewed.
- 'Home' was a relatively unknown reality.
- Relationships with brothers and sisters was especially important and restricted or no contact with siblings had become a particular source of anger, angst and frustration.

# Wider Evidence of Vulnerability

- 34% of people in HMYOI Polmont report being previously looked after and accommodated; 90% have experienced exclusion from school; and 68% reported that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of their offence (Scottish Prison Service, 2014b).
- A much higher rate of bereavement for those in prison of close family members than in the general population (Vaswani, 2008).

# Crime – ‘by product’ of achieving belonging

- Committing crime as part of a group is a by-product of attempting to establish relationships, a means of getting power, acceptance, have fun, achieve ‘authentic belonging’ and a sense of worth.
- Protection
- Weaver (2015: 85) observes that ‘belonging to a group provides a relational web within and through identities can be acquired, tested and performed.’

# The lost boys and girls brought together- shared understanding

One of my brothers' pal...his mother put him in and out of care for the least little thing he done...none of us had a good neighbourhood...we all had a family problem. So like when one person was telling everyone else about theirs, you would be like 'that's right'. It brought the whole of us together basically, because all the bairns used to hang around and jump about...so we were all mostly into trouble, that is what we thought life was about: to live it to the max and to hell with that.

(Amy, Includem)

# First tentative steps towards desistance

- Hope (Weaver and McNeil, 2010; Burnett and Maruna, 2005)
- Impact of a relationship –belief they can and are worthy of change
- Conceptualising a ‘possible self’ (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).
- ‘Knifing off’ from the gang (Maruna and Roy, 2007)
- ‘Hassle factor’ (Barry, 2006)
- ‘Hooks for change’ (Giordano et al. 2002) or ‘shaky pegs’ (Schinkel, 2015)
- Desistance is a remarkable act and a leap of faith.

# Challenges –Act/Primary desistance ‘Knifing off’ and changing habits

- Transition to adulthood normally a time for growing networks. For those attempting desistance, their networks shrink.
- Diachronic self control or self binding (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011) – becoming consequentialist but excessive control = isolation

# ‘Knifing off’ for some- form of self harm?

- Loss of Protection from the gang

I want to have a life that I don't have to watch all the time over my shoulder. I want to be able to walk about freely. Basically, be able to walk to the shop without constantly looking over my back and all that stuff. (Dan, Includem)

- Lonely and alone

# No access to relational desistance- Still seen by others as an offender – trapped by the past

- Continued hassle by the police, in one case even leading to the person losing their job, even though they were being wrongly accused.
- Employers generally reluctant to take a chance, but both services were working hard to change this.



# Feeling Stuck

- No where to go, nothing to do.
- Fragmented families
- Financial stress.
- Unable to find work and achieve the identity of provider.  
Unable to fulfill their role as 'men.'
- Pains of Desistance (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016)

- In your groups discuss these findings and how this could inform effective practice?

- By focusing on 'practice' are we setting these young people up to fail?

# What Helped

- Reaching out
- Support but not professionalising ALL their support
- Being shown love and care
- HUBS
- Access to pro-social networks
- Connections with employers and opportunities
- Broadening horizons









# Understanding what matters...

- Supporting families and connections
- Helping young people build self worth and extend their pro-social networks. To meet others like them who are not professionals and can become friends, walking the same path, together.
- Investing time in young people but not professionalising their support.
- The notion of independence as 'going it alone' is not sustainable, fair or accurate and instead interdependence, the acceptance that we all rely on others is the foundation of success.



# Seven years on...

Seven of the nine that had obtained employment, and by their own description were living a 'good life', credited this to Moving On. They all believed that without Moving On they would have ended up back in prison.

I think that without them I would have been back in the jail. I don't think other folk would have given me a chance. I was just a young boy. I don't think I would have been where I am now anyway. I didn't believe in myself. X and X helped me to do that. I owe them everything. Without them I don't think I would have been where I am today.  
(Richard)

# Being 'Someone' to others just by being you

- An analysis of networks was carried out with all nine 'historic' MO young men. It was revealed that when they first engaged with the service, they could only name the mentors as the people they relied on (and, in three cases the researcher, despite only seeing them once every six months).
- Seven years on, all nine men now named their partners, friends and family as the people they relied on. They had pro-social networks that had not only helped them to move away from offending but to find happiness and contentment in their lives.

# Realising your worth

Mark (Moving On): The truth is I now realise that people do care.

Interviewer: So you didn't realise that before?

Mark: How can you realise when you don't even care about yourself.

# Getting a life

- Having access to a pro-social identity.
- Publicly establishing an alternative lifestyle and being accepted as having changed is vital.
- Relational reflexivity can be extended to wider networks such as the police who have had actual encounters with all of those interviewed, both to reaffirm and challenge desistance (Bradford et al. 2014).
- Independence to be reframed as interdependence.

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