

Criminogenic families

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What does a criminogenic family look like?

To some, it might mean, in dramatic media parlance, the ‘family from hell’ as reported in the press. Families where multiple generations are involved in criminal behaviour, involvement with the police and court system and also with social services. Beaver in 2013 stated that “Research has revealed that crime tends to concentrate in families and that it also tends to be transmitted across generational lines”. Lewis Yablonsky, in his piece ‘Juvenile Delinquency into the 21st Century (2000)’ stated “many delinquents come from criminogenic families that support criminal values through the apparent criminal behaviour of the adults in the family”. Likewise, Edwin Sutherland’s theory of ‘differential association’ suggests that “individuals who become criminal are exposed to more deviant values than positive values”.

Young people who frequently witness aggression between parental figures and/or other familial members are more likely than others to exhibit aggressive behaviour. Several studies have shown that parental/caregiver criminality is linked to violent behaviour among youth. Risk processes may be diverse and include exposure to anti-social peers and pressure on the young person to offend, for example, social learning theory suggests that children who are exposed to interpersonal violence in the home may also learn to use violence in their own lives (Bandura 1977).

Interventions

So, should criminogenic families, families where multiple generations are involved in offending, be approached from a child protection perspective, a youth justice one, or both? The whole system approach (WSA) is intended to ensure that the right service is provided by the right person or agency at the right time for children and young people. Within youth justice policy, early and effective intervention is at the heart of GIRFEC and The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, with interventions focusing on asset and resilience building. In terms of child protection, current policy in Scotland is to identify, assess and intervene with all young people ‘at risk’. Government guidelines and research indicate that all agencies working with children need to work more closely together, and that health, police, education and the voluntary sector must be fully included in the child protection process.

The Signs of Safety (SOS) child protection approach has been adopted across many countries and in 2013/14 was implemented with Children 1st in East Lothian.

It has been used in high-risk child protection case conferences and makes use of a solution-focused, multi-agency, high support methodology. According to an evaluation of its first year it has been showing 'promising early signs'. Another pioneering Children 1st approach is the use of Family Group Conference (FGC) in Scotland, where an independent coordinator brings all professionals and the family together to develop a plan for the child. This methodology was evaluated in 2007 by Barnsdale and Walker where it was found to be a useful tool in terms of involving families in decision making, but there was no longer term outcome data.

Risk factors such as criminality in families are proven through research to affect children going on to offend, however, risk factors are considered dynamic and therefore changeable. Family based interventions such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multi-systemic Therapy (MST) have been shown to be effective with young people who have begun offending. It is worth noting, however, positive results are reliant on this intervention being fairly intensive, structured, long-term, multi-modal and family members being able and willing to support the young person to change their behaviour and desist from offending. Where other members of the family are themselves involved in offending, this is going to prove to be a further obstacle, regardless of which intervention or model is used.

Thus, the question remains how effectively does GIRFEC work for young people who are growing up at risk in homes where criminality is a way of life or in fact a career choice, and is there more that can be done within the framework?

References

- Bandura, A.** Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, Vol 84(2), Mar 1977, 191-215
- Beaver, Kevin M.** The Familial Concentration and Transmission of Crime, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 2013, Vol.40(2), pp.139-155
- Grogan, H. J. & Grogan, R. C.** The Criminogenic Family: Does Chronic Tension Trigger Delinquency? *Crime & Delinquency*, 1968, Vol.14(3), pp.220-225
- Barnsdale, L & Walker, M. (2007)** Examining the Use and Impact of Family Group Conferencing, Scottish Government

Further reading

[Signs of Safety Annual Report 2013/14](#)

[Examining the Use and Impact of Family Group Conferencing](#)

Support

[Circle](#) is an organisation that works across Central Scotland. One of the services it offers is 'Families Affected by Imprisonment' (FABI) which works to minimise the impact of parental imprisonment on children and families.

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