A Baseline Analysis of Garda Youth Diversion Projects: Considering Complexities in Understanding Youth Crime in Local Communities in Ireland

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Summary: The National Youth Justice Strategy was launched in 2008. Its first strategy covers the period 2008–2010 and has five high-level goals. One of these goals – to work to reduce offending by diverting young people from offending behaviour – has been the focus of a baseline analysis of practice undertaken by the Irish Youth Justice Service during 2008/2009. The baseline analysis that focused on Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) is the first step in an improvement programme for this critical intervention designed to positively impact young people at the onset of offending behaviour. The baseline analysis and the issues it raises are the focus of this paper. The intended changes advanced in the analysis will aim to ensure that each local GYDP aligns its efforts to take account of data regarding youth crime patterns within its locality and develops a clear evidence-based rationale to articulate how its activities will contribute to reducing crime. The Irish Youth Justice Service intends to support improvement in effectiveness by investing in targeted training of core staff, developing a learning community to exploit the knowledge across the network of GYDPs, making better strategic use of local information and leading five trial sites to put these ideas into practice.

Keywords: Youth crime, change strategy, evidence-based, crime reduction.


The National Youth Justice Strategy was launched in March 2008 by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Brendan Smith, TD. The first strategy, covering the period up to 2010, provided the framework for

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co-ordinated implementation of the Children Act, 2001 (as amended). In addition the strategy has a clear vision for improving performance in terms of reducing youth offending while ensuring that young people’s rights and needs are safeguarded.

The strategy focuses on five high-level goals:

- to provide leadership and build public confidence in the youth justice system
- to work to reduce offending by diverting young people from offending behaviour
- to promote the greater use of community sanctions and initiatives to deal with young people who offend
- to provide a safe and secure environment for detained children that will assist their early reintegration into the community
- to strengthen and develop information and data sources in the youth justice system to support more effective policies and services.

The second of these high-level goals, the area under discussion for this paper, places a key focus on the Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP). The GYDP is by no means the only intervention that intends to positively impact troubled or troublesome behaviour among young people. Other specific interventions such as the Garda Juvenile Diversion Programme and a number of services falling within the strategic remit of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs all have a key part to play in reducing youth crime.

However, the GYDP represents a significant €13 million investment by Government with an accompanying expectation that the investment will make a meaningful contribution to reducing youth crime in the many localities where the GYDP is based.

**Garda Youth Diversion Projects**

GYDPs are funded by the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) and administered by the Garda Office for Children and Youth Affairs (formerly Garda Community Relations). The first two GYDPs were established in 1991. In 2008, after a period of incremental growth, 100 projects were operating in local communities across Ireland, providing services to some 3,600 young people (see Figure 1). Staff in the GYDP are managed and supervised by 38 youth organisations or community-
based management companies and supported in their operations by a comprehensive set of central guidelines. The staff complement in most projects is two, meaning that almost 200 staff, mainly but not exclusively trained in youth work, form the human resource base for GYDP interventions on a national basis.

Figure 1. Location of Garda Youth Diversion projects (2009)
The total population served by an individual GYDP ranges from (less than) 2,000 to over 60,000 across the 100 projects, although a significant cluster of projects provides services to young people within total populations of 4,000–16,000. Using Census information and Garda statistical data it is possible to estimate that most GYDPs operate within a catchment area where approximately 25–100 young people per year present with additional needs and risks associated with repeat offending following caution by a Juvenile Liaison Officer of An Garda Síochána. From a strategic perspective, the wide distribution of GYDPs across the country servicing relatively small target groups is a considerable strength, particularly when matched with the comprehensive administrative oversight provided by a single national Garda force, allowing reasonable activity and demand levels to be estimated.

The baseline analysis

The baseline analysis was undertaken between March and July 2008, when 96 of 100 projects across the country received a site visit. Each site visit interviewed staff directly involved in developing interventions in the project along with, in the large majority of visits, local members of An Garda Síochána and various members of management from youth organisations.

The visit included a semi-structured interview (see below) in addition to engaging local projects in discussions about what needed to change to improve effectiveness and the barriers to implementing necessary change. The exercise was intended to engage practitioners as consultants and experts rather than solely research respondents; staff were encouraged to reflect and account for their own informed opinions about improving practice when presented with facts about local youth crime patterns.

In 2006, 395,000 young people aged 12–17 years were living in Ireland. Approximately 20,000 (or 5%) of these young people were cautioned for offences by An Garda Síochána. The estimates in the main text apply these figures proportionally to populations of 6,000 and 16,000. Additionally the estimates allow for a possibility that the localities in which projects are based may experience an increased level of youth crime (at 15%, i.e. three times the average cautioning rate) and that half of these young people present with additional risks such that further intervention is necessary.
Format of the analysis

The interview was structured as follows.

Size of population
What is the estimated total population being served by the GYDP? This figure helps to determine the likely number of young people within the catchment area aged 12–18 years and to estimate the number of young people cautioned\(^2\) by An Garda Síochána.

Basic list of offences
What offences are committed by young people within the locality served by the GYDP? Projects were encouraged to be exhaustive. This information helps for comparison purposes but critically provides a key conduit for the remaining discussion and ensures focus for the interview.

Patterns of youth crime in the area served by the GYDP
How do these offences (i.e. those on the basic list) occur in reality? Given the relatively small youth population served by each GYDP and the level of participation by local members of An Garda Síochána, the insights provided in this response were of particular benefit. For instance: when and where do these offences occur, by whom and in what clusters? At a GYDP level this information is useful in gauging the nature and size of the local youth crime challenge. However, these single granularity accounts provided a critically valuable narrative alongside official statistical data on youth crime when aggregated at a national level.

Profiles of young people committing offences
How do the young people who commit these offences present to project staff and local members of An Garda Síochána? What are the personal, family and social features of the young people engaged by the GYDP? Responses included information about young people themselves but also their parents/carers, school performance and the effects of friendship groups and neighbours.

\(^2\) It is accepted that focusing on young people dealt with formally by An Garda Síochána does not provide a full picture, for example in terms of crime that is not reported or detected and crime perpetrated by children under the age of 12 years. However, it is suggested that it provides a reasonably consistent indicator given that all young people whose cases are processed for criminal matters are dealt with by one national juvenile office.
The analysis thus far was designed to produce information to help gauge the total challenge faced by staff. More specifically: how many young people are involved in committing crime in the project catchment area? What are the offences that these young people are committing? What is the narrative or pattern associated with these offences? What are the key personal and social circumstances of the young people involved in these offences, and how do they present?

The interview continued as follows.

What improvement(s) to the current situation is intended by the project?
What positive impact does the project believe it can (or does) make to the issues raised above? This question yielded more information about individual project capacity than a multitude of questions about project activity, which tend to be descriptive and non-discriminating. Aggregated at a national level, this type of information can help to identify where project impact could be maximised and also what features of local youth crime cannot be impacted, requiring support from others.

What is the project’s ‘logic’ for seeking these improvements?
Why does the project believe that if it is successful in achieving these improvements it will make a contribution to youth crime reduction? This question discloses the degree of awareness of each project in relation to how youth crime occurs within its locality, the available research on what types of intervention could be most effective, and how it intends to use its finite resources to make a difference.

The responses to these questions provided valuable insight into the complexities associated with youth offending in local project areas and highlighted strengths and weaknesses in current approaches.

Youth crime in local GYDP areas
The discussions in relation to youth crime yielded significant results that are dealt with more fully in the baseline report.

Alcohol-related offences are the single largest category of offences committed by young people in Ireland. Official An Garda Síochána statistics indicate that this type of offending accounts for a fifth of all juvenile offending. However, taking account of other offences that according to project narratives are clustered in the same offending episodes – where alcohol is a critical factor and part of the offending
sequence – this figure could rise to almost half of all youth offending. According to project accounts, the cluster of offences includes public order-related matters, criminal damage and common assault, although projects pointed out that alcohol-related crime was in many cases a proxy for drug-related crime. The obvious inference is that if projects intend to make an impact on youth crime, alcohol-related youth crime is a good place to start. The full report\(^3\) outlines project-level discussions for a range of offences. However, given that alcohol-related crime represents such a high proportion of all youth crime, it is given prominence in this paper.

With specific reference to alcohol-related crime, the baseline analysis yielded other useful information that is relevant in terms of planning interventions. Firstly, \textit{temporal} factors: in many cases alcohol-related crime has a clear temporal dimension. Most of this offending behaviour peaks significantly during a reasonably small number of hours at weekends, clusters around certain calendar events and presents a steady increase towards the summer (when arguably under-age drinking behaviour is more overt). There were departures from these temporal patterns, notably where young people were involved with friendship groups involved in repeat drinking episodes and where certain degrees of alcohol, drugs and alcohol-type activity appear to be tolerated within families or neighbourhoods.

Secondly, \textit{situational} factors, or the relative ease by which young people could access and consume alcohol, also provided a key context to understanding this type of offending. The overwhelming picture is one of easy access to alcohol. However, it is instructive that in at least two project areas, where the geographical layout was such that there were few alcohol outlets within easy reach, alcohol consumption appeared to occur less frequently than expected and was secured mainly by stealing or taking from home.

The following list does not claim to be exhaustive, but across the 96 projects it appeared that a number of recurrent tactics were employed to secure alcohol.

- Taken from home, with or without the consent of parents
- Adult members of drinking groups purchasing alcohol on behalf of under-age members of the group

\(^3\) Designing Effective Local Responses to Youth Crime, available at www.iyjs.ie
• Targeting licensees who are perceived to be lax in terms of their vigilance in serving under-age customers
• The use of home delivery services and taxis
• Approaching adults within the neighbourhood who are known to be prepared to purchase alcohol for young people
• Making purchases across the border, where it was suspected that certain licensees were less vigilant
• Theft of alcohol from outlets
• False identification

In addition, in most project locations, a finite number of (mainly outdoor) drinking locations were used repeatedly by young people.

Thirdly, there were descriptions of the personal and social circumstances of the young people who had committed the offences. These are dealt with in detail in the full report. Not surprisingly a number of these characteristics mirror the types of risks that appear, from longitudinal research undertaken primarily in the UK and the USA, to be associated with youthful offending. However the narrative accounts provided an extra dimension to the orthodox lists of risk factors by giving meaning to the linkages between certain factors and greater levels of precision. For instance, nuance within the generic risk factor of ineffective parenting (covering at one end of a continuum a parent who is trying their best in straitened circumstances to supervise the young person adequately, and at the other end a parent who may be actively complicit in the offending behaviour) is significant in planning an intervention, the degree of effort involved in executing the intervention and the likely outcome.

Profiling alcohol and public order-related crime

The personal and social circumstances of the young people involved in this offending behaviour, in addition to temporal and situational factors, made it possible to group the offence narratives into three macro-profiles that loosely hypothesise how these offence clusters occur in reality within project catchment areas. In a series of subsequent feedback exercises to all projects in December 2008, the profiles were presented as reference points. The profiles struck a resonance particularly in towns and cities outside of Dublin. The respective profiles are not location-specific; indeed, these patterns of behaviour and their offending context coexist within individual project locations. Each of the profiles was accompanied
by a sketch outlining the perceived linkages between factors and an approximate sequence of events. The sketch outlining Profile 2 is included as an example for the purposes of this paper (Figure 2).

Profile 1: Ad hoc membership/ad hoc activity
Most projects reported that alcohol consumption among young people across their catchment area was widespread, affecting a large percentage of all young people. Many young people consuming alcohol meet in groups on ad hoc occasions (for instance, certain calendar events); the group will have organised how to secure alcohol and will consume the alcohol in one of a reasonably small number of locations. Some of the group will become drunk and gravitate towards the town centre, particularly fast food outlets, committing public order nuisance-type offences and possibly criminal damage offences, and possibly minor assaults on the way. These young people in the main will have satisfactory school attendance, though performance may be impaired. Parents tend to present as concerned about the behaviour and the consequences of involvement with An Garda Síochána.

Profile 2: Regular membership/regular activity
Fifty-two of the 96 projects reported that there was a clear cohort of young people involved in alcohol-related public order offending on a repeat basis. For projects that were able to estimate, the size of these groups varied from fewer than 10 young people to over 40, though these

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**Figure 2.** Profile 2: Alcohol and public order crime
total numbers break down into a number of smaller neighbourhood and friendship groups. The young person in this group typically presented with poor self-control and an indifferent attitude to their offending behaviour, possibly considering the pattern of alcohol and public order offending as normal. Their attitudes more generally are facilitated by a minimising attitude to the offending behaviour by parents and underpinned by loyalty to a friendship group involved in the same or similar behaviour. The situational factors present as similar to profile 1 but the behaviour occurs more frequently, bucking the weekend and seasonal trends. Certain friendship groups or subgroups within friendship groups can be involved together in other group offending episodes, for instance theft.

Profile 3: Regular membership, widespread activity, and external influence
A third of projects identified features within their catchment area where a considerable number of social and environmental factors served either not to discourage or to actively encourage offending behaviour. For most of these projects the features related to a relatively small geographical part of the catchment area and a relatively small number of young people.

However, in these circumstances the young person experiences a powerful combination of processes and influences, some of which he has control over (individual factors such as self-control and consideration of others), some of which he has limited control over (for example, the negative influence of some friendship groups) and some of which he has little or no control over (for instance, the relative saturation of adult and organised crime in the neighbourhood or in the extended family network). According to a number of projects there appears, at least at a superficial level, to be a greater tolerance for alcohol and drugs misuse in the neighbourhoods where these young people live and less of a propensity to make official complaints to An Garda Síochána. The specific reasons for the consequent enclave situation are difficult to specify and may involve equal measures of adult participation in anti-social activity and fear on the part of other neighbours of making complaints.

Young people in these situations have a closer proximity to offending outside of solely alcohol- and public order-related offending, and present as being at more risk of progressing from such ‘pleasure-seeking’ offending behaviour to offences geared more to ‘financial gain’.
Though these illustrations have been constructed using data from 96 individual projects – virtually a census of provision – the resultant macro-profiles have a limited relevance. In the same way that not all young male drivers present a heightened risk, despite overwhelming actuarial evidence, these profiles cannot be applied without examining in detail the local context. Nevertheless, such exercises can generate discussion and debate about where to intervene and how in order to achieve maximum effect.

**Messages from research?**

GYDPs operate in a theoretical environment where there is much discussion and debate about how to contextualise and analyse youth crime, with the corollary that there is equally divergent academic opinion about how best to reduce it. The risk and protection paradigm, perhaps the dominant framework for practice in recent years, certainly in western jurisdictions, advances public health-type metaphors for understanding and responding to youth crime. The data from a number of longitudinal studies have provided raw material for the construction of a range of actuarial and clinical risk assessment tools designed primarily to indicate the probability of further offending and what steps might need to be taken to reduce this likelihood.

In short, this approach asserts that there are means to identify factors operating within various systems in a child or young person’s life which are associated with heightened risk of youthful offending; for instance, impulsiveness, lack of empathy, non-effective parenting, poor school affection and performance, and living in a fractured community. Counterbalancing this are potential protective factors that the logic determines should be enhanced as well as attempting to manage potential risks.

The features identified in the work of Farrington and Welsh (2007) and Hawkins et al. (2008) certainly find a resonance in the discussions held locally with GYDPs. It is clear that interventions designed to encourage young people to reflect and develop a greater consideration for others in addition to improving parenting and school outcomes have a part to play in any response to alcohol- and public order-related crime.

However, what is also clear is that risk factors do not totally account for the complexity of narrative involved in the lives of young people or, as outlined in this paper, even for time and place.
The risk and protection paradigm according to a number of observers has several weaknesses. Critics point to the pseudo-science of the risk paradigm, arguing that supposed clinical terms such as ineffective parenting are largely subjective, that macro profiles or aggregated data cannot be used to determine individual circumstances, that unlike medical science the relationship between risk and outcome is based on association rather than cause, that most data available (e.g. reconviction data) tends to over-represent people from poor communities, and that the obsession with rolling out evidenced and tested programmes has led to the stifling of innovation and reflection among practitioners.

Even where the risk paradigm is well established in terms of mainstream practice, there is often a lack of synchronisation between the assessment of risk and a measured and proportionate response, and criticism that questionable effort is loaded to form-filling at the expense of building critical relationships with young people. Additionally, some commentators advocating the importance of self-efficacy and drawing on theories of resilience argue that too much time is spent avoiding bad things happening and not enough time is spent enhancing the young person’s opportunity for civic engagement, for example acts of altruism.

The often conflicting academic discourse suggests that GYDP should be informed by the available research from longitudinal studies, but should also be sufficiently reflective to innovate where there is a clear rationale for a course of action.

**Using the baseline analysis to improve effectiveness**

The baseline exercise has been an important knowledge-gathering exercise for the Irish Youth Justice Service. With little discussion about project activity, the analysis has attempted to synthesise 96 individual accounts of local youth crime patterns, local practice wisdom and the available research evidence to determine how well aligned the local GYDP is in meeting its challenge to reduce local youth crime. The efficient execution of project intent and the quality of intervention will need to be the subjects of a follow-up study.

It is clear from these discussions that the GYDPs, though similarly configured in terms of staffing, operate in diverse environments such that the degrees of challenge facing projects differ in complexity from project to project and locality to locality. Specific tactics may need to be bespoke to individual localities but, perhaps ironically, the agreement of an
individual project to subject itself to a rigorous logical process in intervention design may bring about a higher degree of accountability and transparency than a national programme roll-out.

Referring back to Profile 2, exercises such as this, particularly when undertaken in consultation with local Garda management and other partners, will assist in terms of hypothesising the risks, processes and relationships associated with youth crime within a given locality. The hypothesis may be imprecise or incorrect as many are, but if it is informed by sound local information and developed by skilled professionals with capacity to reflect, it offers a reference point and an opportunity to be more focused and effective in determining where to intervene. For its part the GYDP cannot respond to all challenges and will have to make judicious choices about the best use of limited resources. However, it affords the opportunity to engage in purposeful discussions with partners about how to reduce risk/promote self-efficacy or to break a particular sequence of events.

None of the projects had undertaken this particular exercise before and, understandably, in many projects interventions and activities had been designed without reference to meaningful data about the local youth crime narrative. Notwithstanding this, peppered across the GYDP network are examples of interventions that display a clear association between the nature of the challenges being encountered and the desired outcomes informed by clear evidence-based logic. Interventions seeking to improve young people’s reflective ability, develop empathy, improve the young person’s motivation to change, challenge parental attitudes and improve parenting effectiveness, improve school outcomes, etc., were all in evidence. This capacity will be further exploited as the improvement programme advocated by the baseline analysis takes hold later in 2009 and into 2010.

Next steps

As a consequence of the baseline analysis An Garda Síochána and the IYJS have committed to an ambitious improvement programme. It is fair to say, given the response to feedback to all GYDPs in a series of six seminars in December 2008, that the youth organisations and local management companies responsible for the delivery of these services have an appetite to be active partners. The programme has three interdependent parts.
1. **Alignment** – From 2010 all GYDP business plans will need to present a local narrative of youth crime and to have demonstrated that this narrative is corroborated by local Garda management. In addition the business plan will present clear evidence-based logic demonstrating how the resources of the GYDP will improve matters and what elements of the narrative cannot be successfully engaged. Subsequent funding support from IYJS will be contingent on these elements being successfully completed.

2. **Capacity-building** – Core training will be arranged for all projects in consultation with practitioners. Initially the training will focus on competence development in pro-social modelling and helping project staff deal with ambivalence, key issues surfacing in the baseline analysis. Additionally IYJS and An Garda Síochána will be considering creative means to exploit the knowledge and talent within the GYDP network to develop a learning community.

3. **Trial sites** – An Garda Síochána and IYJS will provide direct advice and support to five trial sites (2009/2010) within the existing complement of GYDPs to help determine whether the approach advanced in the baseline report adds to project effectiveness.

**Discussion**

The baseline analysis was not a research study. It was an attempt, using a rigorous process, to yield valuable management information to assist IYJS in identifying a start point to give effect to a key part of its strategy.

It was clear from the start that discussions regarding effectiveness related to far more than programme selection, implementation fidelity and measurement. The outcome of the exercise is as much about providing vision that can be clearly articulated from strategic statements of intent to individual transactions between professionals, young people and their families.

The complexities that local GYDP staff deal with are myriad and multidimensional. However, this experience has shown that by engaging practitioners as experts and consultants in a dynamic discussion about how they survey their environment and choose tactics to engage challenges, it is possible to achieve the nuance necessary to understand the local complexity and to draw out the strategic themes necessary for national focus.
The local youth crime picture will change from time to time and perhaps shift radically in its nature, bearing in mind global and local economic difficulties. However, the improving practitioner capacity to further develop the competence for reflection and informed intervention will assist in ensuring that projects are as effective as they can be in tackling crime. While this may seem at odds with the prevailing orthodox risk paradigm, it rather suggests that what we know to be associated with youth crime needs to be considered alongside a very local narrative. It also suggests that what we mostly achieve is, to varying degrees, an approximate understanding and that we need to keep our collective eyes, ears and minds open for signs of change and match precision with momentum. This framework should actually enable practitioners to be more accountable to local context. The size of the jurisdiction, the wide distribution and common mission of GYDPs across the country are key strengths in developing this sense and response dialogue.

In terms of the intended improvement programme, equal value is placed on formal management mechanisms and initiatives to stimulate creativity and capacity. The rationale underlying this approach is that while formal mechanisms akin to quality assurance deliver minimum or satisfactory standards, higher performance will derive from a productive exchange with practitioners within a clear logic-led framework. Such an exchange will also allow talent and leadership to surface and be recognised. The capacity-building measures intend to capture this potential. The trial sites intend to provide colleagues with legitimate comparators, operating within the same resource structure and offering new insights and learning opportunities.

**Conclusion**

The baseline analysis is the first step in realising the ambitions of the National Youth Justice Strategy to secure better outcomes for young people and communities suffering the effects of youth crime. It has adopted a particular strategy in terms of engaging practitioners at local GYDP level in discussions about local crime and crime patterns and exploring the rationale underpinning current responses in each project location. The baseline analysis has advanced formal and cultural changes to current approaches adopted by GYDP in addition to outlining the capacity-building measures necessary to enhance practice and improve effectiveness.
Bibliography