Youth Work—Taking it to the Streets

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The Law Foundation of New South Wales Travelling Fellowship Program allows for workers in the field to obtain grants of up to $10,000 to explore their interests in legal education, community access to the law, crime prevention and related areas, overseas. As part of this program the author had the opportunity to examine youth crime prevention work. Initial contacts were through the Justice, Home Affairs and Youth Affairs Ministries, and through contacts made previously by a number of colleagues.

As in Australia, identifying projects specifically aimed at youth crime prevention was a difficult task, but it was discovered that The Netherlands, France, England and Sweden, have a range of services dealing with the 'youth problem'. These services included recreational programs, drop-in centres, employment and training programs, social welfare services and certainly some crime prevention services.

Youth work has its roots in recreational services, based on the increased leisure time available to young people in the 20th century. The Scouting movement, church based youth groups and sporting clubs were the first expressions of a youth service. These services provided skills, religious training, a social environment for young people and in short, kept them occupied.

In the 60s, 70s and 80s, youth work has changed with the political and economic front moving into areas of welfare, education, employment training and crime prevention; however, youth services predominantly are still working to keep young people occupied.

There seems to be a basic belief held by Australians, and in other countries, that 'idle hands make mischief'. Whereas a picture of a group of fifteen-year-olds having a picnic in a rural paddock conjures up feelings of 'how wonderful it is to see them enjoying themselves'; the idea of a group of young people hanging around a mall, smoking and being loud, conjures up feelings of insecurity and apprehensions of violence.

On the streets late at night—people will cross the street rather than face the onslaught of a band of young people having a night on the town.

Youth crime prevention, as the community perceives it, has two missions:

- to reduce crime in the community; and

- to reduce the perception of crime in the community.

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1 The Youth and the Law Project is a Youth Crime Prevention project in South-Western Sydney.
The community not only wants to be safe it also wants to feel safe. This is the challenge that has been formally placed on the shoulders of the youth services of The Netherlands and France and more informally in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Australia.

**The Netherlands**

In 1984, the Dutch Parliament commissioned an enquiry into crime prevention. The commission of enquiry headed by Dr H. J. Roethof turned in its findings in 1985 in the form of a report 'Society and Crime'. The report provided a blue-print for the development and implementation of a range of crime prevention projects over the subsequent five years and fifty million guilders were allocated to the task.

Over 250 projects were funded under this program to achieve one or more of the report’s three objectives:
- to develop an urban environment according to town planning and architectural criteria which will present the fewest possible opportunities for crime;
- to strengthen the bond between the younger generation and the rest of society;
- to strengthen occupational surveillance by drivers, janitors, shop staff, sports coaches, youth workers and others in respect of potential offenders.

It is the third point which has been adopted by the youth sector with a vengeance, because it is easy to do and because it is easily explained to local decision makers. If young people are watched all the time they cannot do anything wrong.

In The Netherlands a number of drop-in centres are funded under this criteria. These drop-in centres are located adjacent to local shopping centres. Their role is to provide activities for young people during times in which they would otherwise be unoccupied. Coffee shop, pool, sports and pinball facilities are provided and visits to city theatres and attractions are also organised through the centre.

The role of centre workers is to ensure the centre is open and able to provide these activities, to provide information and advice to young people in need and usually to spend part of their time physically bringing young people to the centre.

These sorts of activities are, of course, not unique to The Netherlands: there are also operations in housing estates in the United Kingdom and throughout Sweden.

This seems an expression of what youth crime prevention should not be—and too often is, surveillance. No matter how many young potential offenders we watch, and how long we watch them—there will always be times when this surveillance is lacking.

Youth drop-in centres make the community feel safe—they know where young people are—but if that is simply their role—let us be honest and leave it to the police. It also has the danger of accusing young people of the crime of being young! For what reason do we justify making it unacceptable for young people to be itinerant, unoccupied and ‘hanging around’?

A solution to this situation is:
- recognise that young people have a legitimate right to be on the street;
- engage in crime prevention/youth work that is developmental and not surveillance;
- meet young people on their own turf; and
- have services which respond to the needs of young people.
Some ideas

Zwolle Randgroepenwerk Project (Edge-Group work project) This project, loosely translated as marginal group project, was set up in 1985 to combat rising rates of youth crime, particularly in the areas of petty theft, vandalism and a disturbing rise in crimes of violence perpetrated by the youth of the region.

Zwolle is a small, semi-industrial town in the North Midland of The Netherlands. In typical Dutch style, the town focuses on the old town, a collection of shops and 15th century buildings principally the sole domain of tourists, and moving outwards through expensive residential, and light industrial areas through to the Buitenveldt—or the outer suburbs, made up of high and low rise public housing.

The town has a population of about 80,000 and suffers from disproportionately high rates of homelessness, youth unemployment and a large community of Turkish and Surinamese immigrants.

The Project is an excellent example of taking crime prevention out of a centre and into the young people's environment.

It consists of four workplaces decentralised throughout the region. Three workplaces are based in housing estates—generally a converted shopfront or unit; whilst the fourth is shared with a secondary school, adjacent to the town centre.

The project aims to reduce crime by meeting young peoples' needs.

The Zwolle Project makes contact with young people, discovering what particular needs of theirs are lacking and working with these young people and the community to meet these needs.

The Project began in response to a series of particularly brutal attacks on the region's gay community by a group of young people. These young people were, at the time, living in a squat, near the town centre.

The Project team made contact with these young people and began to work with them to fill their most pressing need—that of a home.

The Project staff set about gaining the permission of the housing corporation to hand over the lease of the premises they were staying in, in return for which the young people would renovate it. The team also made contact with local building materials and suppliers, and local tradespeople, to provide materials and training for the group.

Over two years the group renovated two buildings, after which they gained employment in the local glasshouse manufacturing industry. They are no longer involved in the reported thuggery against the local community.

The story is not, of course, as simple as that. It took a great deal of time and effort to gain the trust and support of the group, and a great deal more time and effort to gain the support of the local community for the venture.

This initial project has formed the model for all the work of the project.

The essential elements of the needs-based approach Make contact with young people through police, schools, drop-in centres, other contacts;

- identify their needs through discussion; and
- use community resources to give the young people opportunities to meet those needs.

The advantages of this approach are that if young people control the process, it operates within their own territory and it brings young people into contact with the wider community.
The major disadvantage is that it is a labour intensive service. The Zwolle Project employs twenty-two staff who, over the course of one year, work with about sixty young people. It is to the credit of the local community that they consider the quality of service provided to young people—of much greater importance than quantity.

**Youth service—the Mission Locale**  A further example of the needs based approach to youth crime prevention can be seen with the Mission Locale idea.

Often the approach of youth workers is to 'look after' the needs of young people. If they need a place to stay—we find one, if they need something to do—we provide them with a range of toys; if they are having problems at school—we visit their teachers and sort them out. In other words we take on the problem as our own, and answer it.

The end result of this method of operation is that youth workers become very skilled at gathering information, solving problems and gaining access to services. The young people under their care, however, come out of the process with one problem solved, one need met; but generally without the skills to solve even that same problem again.

This process is labour intensive, quick and easy, and self-perpetuating. It also continues the process perpetuated by most of the community—that of taking control out of the hands of young people.

The principal problem young people face in having their needs met, lies in:

- lack of knowledge of 'who' makes the decisions;
- lack of knowledge of how to find out who makes the decision;
- lack of assertiveness and information gathering skills; and
- the 'counter run-around'.

**Mission Locales**  These were set up in France as part of a broad range of crime prevention programs under the banner of 'Bonnemaison'.

The centre was set up to facilitate the employment and social integration of young people. Young people come to the centre for information. Typically young people come because they suffer problems of unemployment, homelessness or difficulties with the education system.

Staff at the centre provide a description of the existing services that can help the young people. For example, if a young person is unemployed, staff will explain how to gain access to social security payments, how to seek employment and which services can assist with emergency financial aid.

It is then up to the young people themselves to go out and take advantage of these services. The staff will often make appointments; however, they will not fill out forms or see the people themselves.

Through this process, the clients learn the 'nitty gritty' of making oneself understood by counter staff, how to fill out forms, how to find these services—all the information that will assist them in doing it themselves (or providing information for their peers)—the next time.

There is, as well, a fail-safe mechanism. Staff monitor the progress of young people through these services, to ensure that they do not again, fall through the gaps.

The approach of the staff is a holistic one. The 'Mission Locale' recognises that there is rarely an occasion where a young person is 'just homeless'. The staff maintain contact with young people until all their needs have been met.
Conclusion

The important features to crime prevention projects are:

- ensuring young people maintain control;
- operating in young people's environments and not the worker's place of safety; and
- ensuring that the process is a developmental one.

Finally, an enterprise in Stockholm illustrates the risks and rewards of this sort of process.

Sweden: City Gruppen

Stockholm had a particular problem with a group of twenty or so Skinheads. The Skinheads were the perpetrators of violent attacks particularly against blacks and shopkeepers in Kungsgatan, near the city.

Most of the young people whose homes are on the outskirts of Stockholm live, for all intents and purposes, on the streets of Kungsgatan.

It fell to the City Gruppen project to do something about this problem.

City Gruppen aimed to:

- get them off the streets;
- reduce their excessive drinking; and
- remove the opportunity for right-wing groups to use these young people to their own advantage.

They tried traditional methods of drawing these young people back into society; counselling, providing activities such as music studios and eventually incarceration of the ring leaders—with little success. Eventually they decided to meet the group on their own terms.

The group had expressed the interest in having a Skinhead clubhouse in Kungsgatan. This, they argued, would allow them to play music, discuss Skinhead issues, and obviously to drink within the confines of a building, rather than in public view.

City Gruppen agreed to this idea provided the group would accept the supervision of a social worker. The group agreed to this and City Gruppen began looking for a building. Obviously nowhere could be found. It was not surprising that owners of particular buildings were not thrilled by the idea of letting their premises for a Skinhead clubhouse. Eventually, a building company came to the rescue by providing two demountable buildings for the Skinheads, and the City of Stockholm provided vacant land and up to 90,000kr² to kit it out. The group now had a clubhouse, complete with furniture, fridge, sound system and telephones!

² A$1.00 = approximately 5kr (as at October 1991)
For some time this seemed to appease the Skinheads, however, after eighteen months the problems soon began. Excessive drinking, lack of organisation and dissidence within the group eventually led to the clubhouse being virtually destroyed, and the social worker being almost strangled by the leader of this group.

Rather than abandon the project, discussions between police and City Gruppen culminated in a decision to leave the group to their own devices and to assist them in solving their own problems by providing them with funding to employ their own staff. With funding the group was offered a challenge. They understood that this funding would only continue if the funds were used wisely.

There were in fact two groups of Skinheads; a small group of those who were extremely negative and searching for a licence to attack society, and a much larger group of 'positive Skinheads' who were interested in music, clothes and hairstyle of being a Skinhead. In short, the positive Skinheads kicked out the negative ones.

Why did it work?

- The negative Skinheads enjoyed being ostracised by society—it was part of their culture;

- by providing the things they asked for, society was welcoming them in—on the Skinhead terms, not society's; and

- the Skinheads were given control.

Could we do this in Australia?