

Restorative Justice, Social Capital and Desistance from Offending

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Abstract. *Restorative justice has been the primary approach towards young people who offend and their victims within the youth justice system in Northern Ireland since 2003. It has generally been evaluated as effective and an improvement over previous practices. However there is a small percentage of young people who persist in their offending and have participated in multiple restorative conferences without desisting from harmful behaviour. This affects public confidence in restorative justice and poses a challenge to the Youth Justice Agency. As a result, an innovative Priority Youth Offender Project was developed based upon research into desistance, operating under restorative values and principles and using an adaptation of circles of support and accountability. A sample of young people who participated in this project was studied. This article reports on the findings of the study which confirms that restorative processes can strengthen relationships, generate social capital and contribute to the process of desistance from offending.*

Keywords: restorative justice, social capital, desistance, circles of support and accountability

Restorative justice within the youth justice system in Northern Ireland

A system of restorative conferences for young people who admitted to a crime and for their victims was made law in Northern Ireland through the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. The Youth Conference Service commenced in 2003. Young people are offered a restorative conference by the Public Prosecution as a diversion from prosecution in court or, in more serious cases which are prosecuted in the courts, by a judge who has very little discretion and must offer a conference to all young people who consent to it. Conferences are available to young people from the age of 10 to 18, though over 80% of the young people who participate are aged over 15.

Restorative justice has been placed in the mainstream of the Northern Irish youth justice system. The legislation also transfers power from the professionals to the young person who has offended and the victim to decide whether a conference goes ahead (though it is possible to proceed with a conference without the victim's attendance).

Those who must be present at a youth conference include the coordinator, the young person, an appropriate adult (includes parents, carers and other supporters), and a police

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officer. Those who may be present include the young person's lawyer, the victim, and the victim's supporters and appropriate others such as community representatives, a social worker or a probation officer. The youth conference is prepared and facilitated by a full time, qualified coordinator employed by the Youth Justice Agency. Its purposes are to come to an agreement as to what action is to be taken to address the needs of the victim for reparation and to reduce the risk of the young person repeating the harmful act. Action plans may include an apology, reparation work, financial compensation, supervision by an adult, participation in activities or programs to address offending, restrictions on actions (which can include custody) and treatment for a mental condition or for alcohol or drugs.

Once there is an agreement, a report is sent to either the Prosecutor or Youth Court. It is then ratified as it stands or with some amendments. In the case of a court referred conference, the agreement becomes a youth conference order which is enforceable. The prosecution referred agreed action plan is voluntary. If the young person does not complete it the Prosecution Service can prosecute for the original offence. The young person will be supported to complete the action plan by a youth justice worker.

The Youth Conference model is based upon the 'Balanced Model of Restorative Justice' (Zinsstag, Chapman, 2012) which holds that a satisfactory process of justice must address the needs of the offender, the victim and the community through an inclusive and participative process. The process is structured but not 'scripted'. The facilitators use a narrative dialogue approach (Chapman, 2012) through which they enable the parties to tell their stories and enter into dialogue in their own way.

There have been around 17,000 youth conferences since December 2003. There is a high level of victim participation (around 50% of conferences include direct victims and a further 20% indirect victims¹) and victim satisfaction (90% +). 95% of action plans are completed successfully. Reoffending rates are consistently significantly lower than other community supervision options (e.g. probation orders and community service orders). This is a considerable achievement especially when youth conferences are offered to virtually all young people who offend no matter how seriously or persistently they commit crimes. For example far fewer young people with no previous convictions will receive a youth conference order in the courts than a probation order. Yet the rate of reoffending is lower for youth conference orders than probation orders.

The Northern Irish youth conference approach to restorative justice has been evaluated in a series of reports very highly and is seen as an influential model of good practice internationally². In the most recent statistical bulleting from the Department of Justice (Duncan, 2014), there were 1,014 youth conferences compared to 126 other disposals (probation orders, community service orders etc.). This means that a huge majority of young people opt for a restorative conference even though it usually means meeting the person whom they have harmed and committing to a rigorous agreement to repair the harm and to stay out of trouble.

The problem of repeat conferences

Generally the youth conference model in Northern Ireland has been assessed as effective. However, a small group of young people who persist in their offending have proved to be problematic. The legislation requires judges to offer a restorative conference to any young person who admits the offence and as long as that person consents a conference will be arranged. This means that a young person who continues to offend will participate in many conferences.

In 2011 when this research was undertaken 63% of young people who participated in a youth conference did not reoffend. On each subsequent conference a proportion of young people desist from offending so that accumulating all the young people who experienced from one to five conferences only 6% continue to offend. By the time all young people who have participated in up to 10 conferences have been included, only 1% persist in offending. This demonstrates that each conference will enable a proportion of young people to stop committing crimes.

While victims continue to benefit from conferences through the vast majority (95%) of reparation agreements being carried out satisfactorily, a small group of young people continue to harm others in spite of numerous opportunities and offers of support to desist from offending. This clearly undermines the credibility of restorative justice in relation to judges, policy makers and the general public.

What is different about young people who persistently offend ?

O'Mahony and Chapman (2002) interviewed all the inmates at Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre. These were young people aged 17 to 21 years who have been given a custodial sentence for their offending. They represent an accurate sample of young men who offend persistently. The study found that :

- Over 80% had been suspended from school and 50% had been expelled ;
- Over 66% had no formal educational or vocational qualifications ;
- Only one in five had been employed ;
- 66% had been in custody before ;
- 66% had relatives who had been in prison ;
- 9% had a history of attempted suicide and 11.5% had a history of self harm ;
- Almost 25% had received psychiatric or psychological treatment ;
- For 80% there was a clear link between alcohol and offending ;
- For 71% there was a clear link between drug use and offending.

Young people who offend persistently appear to be among the most vulnerable and marginalised young people in society. Many young people (some studies³ estimate 90%) will have experienced trauma such as multiple bereavements and violent events both as a participant and a witness (Vaswani, 2008). It is clear that their offending behaviour has both been caused by difficult relationships with important resources such as family and schools and has in turn further weakened these relationships. It is likely that they have experienced shaming and stigmatisation (Braithwaite, 1989) and as a way of coping may have developed a 'condemnation script' (Maruna, 2001). They will have a narrative or story to explain and justify their offending and the impossibility of change. This reinforces a criminal identity.

Maruna (2001) describes the prognosis for many persistent offenders as 'dire'. This is due to their criminogenic background, environments and traits that they experience. McNeill (2009) describes persistent offenders as often highly fatalistic and lacking in agency. Desisting from crime is extremely challenging for these young people as they are excluded from much of the social capital that people need for a good life and they have in many cases become resigned to the belief that they are 'bad' and cannot change. At least two challenges face those who wish to support these young people to stop harming others and themselves :

1. How to enable them to gain access to and sustain the social capital they require for a better life without recourse to crime ;
2. How to enable them to change their inner narrative that leads them to conclude that change is neither worthwhile nor possible.

In Northern Ireland the Youth Justice Agency decided to establish a Priority Youth Offender Project (PYOP) with a dedicated team of workers and a specific restorative practice model based upon Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). First we want to review the underlying theoretical framework of this approach, then describe the practice model and finally report on a small research study into its effectiveness.

Social capital and narrative theories of desistance

Desistance is more than simply not committing (or being detected and convicted of) any offences over a significant period of time. It should mean that the young person has decided to live as a law-abiding and contributing citizen and has access to the relationships and resources to do so. It requires an internal change in identity or self narrative and an external change in social circumstances. It is not an immediate break from past behaviour but a gradual process typically characterised 'two steps forward, one step back'.

Theories of desistance tend to focus on maturation or growing up, on social bonds, or on narrative changes in the offender and his or her sense of self (Maruna, 2001). It is usually an interaction between these three factors (Farrall, Bowling, 1999) in specific individual's lives. It is not just getting older, getting married or getting a job, it is about what these kinds of developments mean and signify to offenders themselves and whether they represent compelling enough reasons for and opportunities to change the pattern of one's life.

Maruna (2001) maintains that desistance is about personal redemption, not necessarily in the spiritual or theological sense but rather in the sense of finding a way to 'make good' on a troubled and troubling past by making a positive contribution to families or communities now. Psychologists refer to this as 'generativity'; indeed generativity may provide one hypothesis about why reparative actions sometimes outperform rehabilitation programmes in reducing offending (McNeill, Maruna, 2007).

For Maruna (2001) redemption is an internal script or story that explains and convinces the individual of the possibility of change, yet maintains one's sense of personal identity and protects one from becoming overwhelmed with shame over past actions. The beliefs that support desistance can include: 'the real me' is basically a good person; crime is not central to my life; an external 'it' has caused my offending; with support I can free myself from these external constraints; I wish to be productive and to give something back to society; I can be in control of my destiny.

Such beliefs do not develop just because a social worker says that they should. Maruna (2001) found that the fatalistic beliefs that young people have adopted about themselves and their ability to change are founded on evidence of actual experience. For these beliefs to change, the young people need evidence that their beliefs are limited and limiting and that they are 'good people' capable of change and worthy of support. This evidence can be generated by what the young people do and feedback from people who are significant to them. Social capital is a valuable resource not only providing young people with the supportive relationships that they need but also as a source of feedback.

Social networks are not only important in terms of emotional support but also crucial in giving people more opportunities, choice and power (Boeck et al., 2006). However, there can be significant differences between the types of networks people have, not only in quantity but also in quality. The concept of social capital can encapsulate these differences, especially in the life of a young offender.

There are different types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding social capital resides in family and friendship relationships, and peer groups that provide a sense of belonging in the here and now. Bridging social capital creates links with people outside

immediate circles of relationships. These networks can be very important for broadening our opportunities and horizons. Linking social capital relates to relationships between people with varying levels of power. It is good for accessing support from formal institutions. Putman (2000) considers the distinction between bridging and bonding to be of crucial importance, referring to bridging as 'exclusive networks' and bonding as 'inclusive networks'. He maintains that bonding social capital is good for 'getting by' but bridging social capital is crucial for 'getting ahead'. Thus, bridging social capital is seen to generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.

While there is ample evidence that access to social capital can prevent offending and exclusion from social capital is associated with persistent offending, this study was designed to assess whether young people, who persist in offending and who have resisted previous opportunities to desist, will desist if they gain access to social capital.

The Priority Youth Offending Project and Circles of Support and Accountability

The PYOP intervention (Chapman, 2010) recognized that :

1. The young offenders are individuals who have strengths ;
2. They may have experienced adversity and trauma in their lives ;
3. Consequently they may lack the skills and resources to live a good life ;
4. Criminal actions frequently represent attempts to achieve desired goals where skills and resources are not possessed ;
5. Risk may be reduced by assisting young offenders to develop skills and capabilities to achieve goals ;
6. Intervention should be designed to add to the repertoire of functioning rather than simply managing or solving problems.

PYOP has embraced the ethos of the Good Lives Model (Ward, Maruna, 2007) as an effective model towards desistance. The intervention steps are provided through programmes and activities that develop both the resilience and human capital of the young person and the relationships and social capital in his or her life. It is a restorative rather than rehabilitative approach. The outcome is to restore what is needed for desistance from harm and to overcome obstacles to a good life by enabling the young people to demonstrate their strengths and positive qualities and provide pathways to a positive role in the community.

The primary framework for this approach is the Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA). This model originates in Ontario in Canada from 1996 as a method to reintegrate adult sex offenders. It has been adapted in Northern Ireland to engage persistent offenders in change.

Circles create partnerships, which promote positive interaction and accountability for Priority Youth Offenders. The COSA includes two categories of membership :

- The core group is made up of people from the young person's family and community who care and want to support him/her to achieve goal. This group should be in relationship with the young person long after the program is completed. The young person should be involved in choosing who are invited. This is very important as they must have ownership of their circle. They may include : family or carers, friends, neighbors, teachers or employers, youth workers, sports coach, church representative etc.
- The supporting group of specialist services which may include : substance misuse worker, mental health worker, police officer, mentor, social worker etc.

The COSA membership should evolve in a purposeful and managed way. At first it may be predominantly made up of professionals (supporting group) but as the program progresses the young person and worker should be increasing the core group membership so that professionals can withdraw with the assurance that the young person continues to receive the support needed. It is also an opportunity for members to communicate their expectations to the young person for successful integration back into the community and help them to recognise the harm their offending behaviour have caused others. In this way young people are supported to make amends and to take steps towards desistance from offending.

The young people entering PYOP were on youth conference orders. They will have agreed plans of work ratified in court, which they have to complete. The Circle communicates to the young person the support they will receive to achieve the agreed goals in the plan and to hold them accountable for avoiding harmful behaviour. The young person will have a time-table which involves meeting at least one member of the COSA at a specific time every day of the week. This provides support, structure and accountability.

The Circle will be primary vehicle for managing risk and enforcing restrictions, for delivering rehabilitative programs, for making reparation and for reintegrating the young person into the relationships necessary for a good life. The focus is on the future rather than the past and service to the community is a key feature integrating the young person into his/her community.

The COSA is an intervention model that introduces young people to warm and positive relationships. They receive supportive relationships from PYOP staff and are encouraged to build relationships with family, extended family and with groups of friends in their community or environment they are placed in by getting involved in a COSA. The aim is to enhance pro social relationships that will act as protection against risks in the environment. PYOP bridges social capital by providing positive opportunities and diversionary activities whilst helping the young people gain the resources they need to achieve goals towards a better life, to refrain from offending and to thrive in a modern diverse society.

Research study

Methods

The research focused on young people who persistently offended and who had been referred to PYOP. It assessed the interventions that they received and in particular the Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA). The research is based upon the analysis of the views of the young people through semi-structured interviews. It is also based upon their case notes so as to assess any changes in the circumstances or behaviour.

The core research questions were: If a COSA is in place with the required resources, is there an improved likelihood that the young people engaged in PYOP will have enhanced social capital, and will this assist with desistance? To address this question the semi-structured interviews inquired into:

- The young people's understanding of their COSA and its purpose;
- The quality of the supervision from the young people's point of view;
- The relevance and usefulness of the services offered to the young people;
- The membership of each COSA;
- Whether the COSA increased young people's access to social capital;
- The effect of participation in the COSA on reoffending.

To increase the willingness of the young people to speak freely, an informal conversational style of interviewing was adopted. The interviewees understood that they were valuable sources of information for the study whose purpose they appreciated and they were not judged.

In total, 20 young people were interviewed. Both the young people and their parents or carers consented to the interview after being given a full explanation of its purpose and how the information would be kept secure and eventually used. All had been engaged with PYOP for 10-12 months at the time of interview. They were assessed as both at a high risk of reoffending and marginalized within their families and communities. Their offences included : armed robbery, possession of offensive weapon, assault, criminal damage, sexually harmful behavior, car crime, theft, and riotous assembly.

Many of them had experienced multiple traumatic issues combined with a lack of support to recover. There was evidence of educational underachievement, depression, low self-confidence and esteem and on going patterns of self-harm and risk-taking behaviour. They were aged between 16 and 18 years old except for one who was 12. 17 were male and three were female. 9 were living with at least one parent and 11 were in children's homes, hostels or their own accommodation. 12 had drug addictions. 2 of the females were caring for their own babies while the third had had two miscarriages. 8 had previously attempted to take their own life. 4 were diagnosed with serious mental health problems.

Results and discussions.

Did participation in the COSA increase young people's access to social capital ?

The data gathered through the interviews were analysed qualitatively according to the categories listed above. Responses were subjected to a simple statistical analysis albeit from a small sample. All 20 of the young people interviewed had an understanding of the PYOP and its purpose. They appeared aware of the differences between PYOP and their previous experiences of the Youth Conference Service and Probation Service and spoke clearly about the amount of time PYOP staff spent with them, the support they were given and also about the involvement of a COSA.

I have a circle and definitely have more support. I have a timetable and I see [name of supervising officer] twice a week and then others the rest of the days. Everybody is dead on.

85% of the young people felt that there was more support within PYOP. There were a variety of responses to why the support was felt to more intense than previous supervision :

My friend hung himself. I went off the rails a bit. [Named supervising officer] understood me and helped me get back on track. I wasn't nice to him at that time but he still helped me. I was out of it on blues.

Being consistent and not giving up on the young person even when he or she acted badly was acknowledged by them. There was evidence also that individual staff on occasions engaged over and above their role that was identified by the young people.

I was crazy man, didn't care about anything. It was the blues, they wiped me out. I was a mad man. I went to a real man who knew about drugs. He was a drug addict one time and after a while I started to see sense. I still take a bit of blow, but the best thing is now, I have a job. Do you see when you can earn your own money it is great man. Really great. PYOP staff helped me but I got the job myself. I bought some of the staff a cup of coffee the other day with my own money. I said I owe you hundreds of cups. They're all sweet.

Two young people were more critical about the support offered. One stated that although it 'kept me on the right track' he preferred to be left alone. The second young person stated that all the support he was receiving in PYOP was good, but it would not make him change his ways. He would do that when he was ready. It was his choice.

Sixteen of the young people felt the supervision was more than they had experienced previously. They linked this with the support, with the programs offered within PYOP and also with the other agencies they had to see as part of their weekly timetable.

We meet every six weeks for the Circle. I call it my circle of trust.

Supervision is different in PYOP. There was no consistency before in Probation. They always changed your worker and they never listened. Now you get a chance to speak and a chance to explain why you didn't do your plan or meet with your probation officer.

Eighteen of the young people thought that they were held accountable if they were not committing to their Orders. The most common reasons were not attending appointments or refusing to complete community service. All young people stated that they were held accountable. Two young people stated sometimes felt that they should have been breached much sooner, or taken back to court for non-compliance. They appeared grateful that they were not and also stated that previous to PYOP they would not have been given the extra opportunities to complete their Orders. All 20 young people stated that they had been checked at some stage in their PYOP experience for not adhering to their Orders. They all appeared very clear about non-compliance or breach proceedings and the consequences if they didn't reengage.

I was breached, but got a chance to put it right again. I was in a bad way with the drugs and things, needed time to settle down before I could do anything. At least they listened to me, I almost finished the Order now.

I trusted everyone in my circle. I told them they had to listen to me. It was my circle and they did. My circle of support helped me do my conference plans and other stuff. When I didn't do it I told them the truth, I didn't care about completing them, all I wanted was my drugs. When I was ready they supported me. I wasn't ashamed at all ; I'm still not ashamed. I've had a shit life. I'm ashamed for hurting that lady, but not ashamed of not doing my Order. I will finish it before the time runs out. I have promised them (COSA) that.

All 20 young people stated clearly that their supervising officers would contact them very soon after a non compliance and advise them to reengage or fulfill the appointment made or complete an action point in the Order.

100% of the young people received a timetable. 90% were clear on what they were doing. The 10% who were not sure stated that they sometimes got mixed up because programmes changed times from week to week or they were cancelled altogether and this confused them. 100% were clear on whom they should speak to and 100% felt that the timetable kept them focused and helped them attend all their appointments, which also helped them complete their Youth Conference or Probation order.

It gives you the confidence you need. I was a bit nervous before starting all these Orders ; I never thought I would get through them. The timetable breaks it up and gives you something to do every week so it doesn't all get on top of you.

It gives you clear directions, support and I always know who I am going to and who I have to contact. I get pissed off when the activity you are to attend gets cancelled.

In general all young people were adamant that they were offered services and were positive about the content and activities they were involved in, giving much detail and positive feedback on many of them. In particular drug and alcohol counseling received particular

praise especially for the counselors that had been through similar experiences to the young people involved. This appeared to strike a chord with them. 100% of the young people stated that if they were 'In the right place' they would have availed of the services and 100% stated that there were more services offered within PYOP than previous supervision they had experienced.

[Named drug counseling] is good. It helped me cut down smoking weed. BMX! I'm good at this, always learning new tricks.

Very supportive, giving direction and a routine. I also got the Duke of Edinburgh award. OCN in mentoring and will now mentor others.

It was clearly evident that the COSA was predominantly made up of professionals, parents or community members who were adults. All of the young people who had a COSA stated that they did have ownership of their circle and some stated that they would not want to involve friends, boyfriends, girlfriends or other family members because they wanted their offending to be private.

I broke the law, didn't want friends or family knowing all the details. It's all bad enough for me to deal with, don't want to put them through it too.

When asked to put the COSA members in order of importance: 50% stated that everyone in their COSA was important, in some way or another. 20% stated that a family member was the most important. This was usually the mother. 20% stated that their supervising officer was the most important and the remaining 10% ranged from, drug worker, social worker or community worker.

The main objective of the COSA is to involve professional, family and friends and community as soon as possible to build up a rapport with the appropriate individuals to give support at crucial times in the young person's life. It is understandable and correct that when first having a COSA there will be a high level of professionals involved. As the COSA develops and progresses ideally there should be less professionals and more family and more people from the community as the main aim for the young person is to be reintegrated back with family and community.

The study found that the COSA has not succeeded in decreasing the professional involvement. There are many reasons that could be suggested for this. Many of the young people are on Probation Orders that last for 18 months and over. They remain with their Probation Officer and therefore remain within PYOP for longer periods of time. The second reason is that the young people remain high risk and need the professional level of involvement in their lives. The third reason is that many of the young people have no one else in their lives to support them or have the rapport with them that they request. Many want the professional worker to remain in their COSA.

In relation to increasing access to social capital there appears to be an improvement in all areas when young people choose to engage in a COSA. School and employment made some improvements starting at 50% attending when entering the COSA, which progressed, to 60% mid way and ending at 70%. Increasing the interest in hobbies also progressed. 30% stated that they had hobbies when entering a COSA. This progressed to 35% mid way and 45% at the end. The view of the young people was that they had a positive relationship with family. This started at 60% improved further to 78% mid way and ended at 80%. Community relationships appear to have taken more time to develop. Starting at 60% there was no improvement midway into the COSA. However, this improved by the end of a COSA raising to 82%. The reasons for this may have been that the community wanted to see the commitment made by the young person in the COSA before making a commitment and vice versa for the young person. Finally, many of the young people stated that they already had good friends prior

to entering the COSA, however with the activities and other resources offered with PYOP and COSA, they had been introduced to more and this improved to 90% ending at 98%.

There was a percentage that had no contact with family prior to having a COSA and the COSA gave them the opportunity to improve relations and to bring the family together.

[Named keyworker] got me to meet with my mum and dad, my sister came too. We chatted at the COSA. I didn't go home right away. They wouldn't let me, but I am at home now. I am trying to be good. I'm off the hard stuff, just smoke a bit of blow'.

Whilst in PYOP, great efforts were made to encourage reintegration back into the community and many of the young people felt that they had improved relations with their community and were welcomed back onto their streets and locality.

I wasn't allowed home to my mum's house. There was threat against me. When they seen the improvements I was trying to make they have said I can go home if I behave myself.

The young people were asked what were the two most important things that the people in their circle had given them. 90% of the young people spoke about support ; 80% of the young people stated good listening ; 75% of the young people spoke about trust ; 80% said staff care ; 50 % of the young people appreciated that staff were available to them at all hours.

Did access to social capital reduce the risk of reoffending ?

Others spoke positively about their change in attitude and how their behaviour had improved because of this. 75% of the young people were keen to acknowledge that, while in PYOP and having a COSA, they were supported as individuals to make positive changes in their lives and to decide themselves to make a change.

When asked to give more detail on future offending 95% of the young people indicated that they wanted to stop offending. 5% stated that they would stop when they felt the time was right for them. 50% spoke about the difficulties of 'keeping it together'. They described the challenges of staying away from misusing substances, peer pressure, witnessing opportunities that were easy crime for them and feeling out of the loop, being isolated from their negative peers led to loneliness and feelings of being unwanted and not being part of the gang. However they were keen to stress that they were trying and did not see themselves now as 'offenders' and strongly felt they wanted to 'dissociate themselves from that way of life'.

I've stopped offending, trying to get a job but the best thing for me was meeting the staff, going to BUS (Belfast Urban Sports) and always having someone there for me.

These young have had many previous criminal convictions. One had 32 previous court orders. On average they had 11.3 previous convictions each. In the year since they had joined PYOP 9 of the young people had re-offended and 11 had not offended. 7 of the young people who had offended were in custody. Even some of those who had re-offended believed that the project was helping them to desist. 80% of the 20 young people felt that being in PYOP and having a COSA was helping them to stop offending now and 60% thought that they could maintain their positive efforts in the future. For those who said no, they stressed that no one could stop them offending. It would be their own decision and in their own time. One young person commented that even though the support was there, the final decision to refrain from offending had to be the individual decision. In speaking about the future the slight change noted by the young people was that they didn't like to predict the future and they were unsure when leaving PYOP and perhaps not having a COSA that they would not have the same support and may reoffend.

I've stopped already. I have a future now, enjoying freedom. I'm looking forward to be a mentor and help others in the future.

It's easy to say I'll not offend in the future. Hopefully I won't, but life outside will be different and I may not cope as well as I want too.

I don't like to predict the future, who knows, but I definitely don't want to go back to that life.

Summary and conclusions

This qualitative study has limitations. The sample was relatively small, just 20 young people. However, the researcher was able to gain the trust of the young people and talk with them in some depth. It was conducted within 18 months of the young people commencing the program. Consequently while it is possible to identify immediate outcomes, one cannot be sure whether these outcomes were sustained.

The aim of the program is to enhance social capital by receiving intensive support and guidance through having a COSA. 85% of those interviewed stated that they received more support than previous forms of supervision. 90% commented that they were held accountable if they did not attend appointments or were not adhering to their Orders. 80% highlighted that supervision and accountability were more rigorous within PYOP.

The relationship building within the project emerged as being a fundamental benefit within PYOP and COSA. The relationship with the supervising officer was clearly viewed as being pivotal to gaining the young people's engagement and co-operation. Relationship building with family, community and professionals within the COSA was critical to progress towards change. 80% stated that having a COSA made them think more about themselves and their future.

The important areas that were reported about participating in a COSA were :

- the excellent support ;
- staff would always listen ;
- staff were trustworthy ;
- staff genuinely cared ;
- they were there at all times ('24/7').

100% reported that being in PYOP and having a COSA had improved their outlook in life and they wanted a new life free from crime. 100% commented on the positive structure within the project and 100% reported that they were offered activities either in counseling, sports or both. 45% stated that they had reoffended and 55% did not. 80% stated that being in PYOP and having COSA supported them not to offend and 80% felt that being in PYOP and having a COSA has had a positive impact on their lives.

The key purpose of this study was to critically examine the theory and concepts of Circles of Support and Accountability and to evaluate whether they present any real value in enhancing social capital whilst promoting a path towards desistance and to a better life.

The results from this small sample have highlighted that COSA greatly enhanced social capital and offered an opportunity to young people to seek a pathway out of a life in crime. The significant areas identified were :

- That young people's perceptions often changed towards people who were different from them e.g. social workers, other professionals, peer groups in the community. With time and support from PYOP staff, they were enabled to learn from each other, enhance their bridging social capital by creating new and diverse social networks. This was important in terms of emotional support but also crucial for their personal and social development, subsequently presenting them with opportunities, choice and power.

- There was significant evidence that the intensive support offered by staff enabled the development of strong relationships with young people. This enhanced their engagement on programmes and reparative activities. The results further demonstrated that when young people and COSA members alike were accredited with a level of influence and a sense of feeling trusted, they were empowered, had ownership and demonstrated integrity among COSA members. This created processes for social capital to be further enhanced. The young person remained the core member of their circle, therefore putting them at the centre of change. This provided them with support and accountability to achieve their goals, to supervise risk management plans and reinforce compliance. It strengthened the young person's relationship with family, school/employment and community. It also engaged the active participation of informal resources and specialist services which worked together as a team to deliver rehabilitative programmes, for making reparation and for reintegrating the young person into relationships necessary for a better life.
- The importance of enrolling relevant community members into a COSA proved instrumental in enhancing community cohesion. 5% of young people interviewed in this study, were instructed to leave their community due to anti-social behaviour. The COSA provided the community with personal involvement in managing the young people at risk and created an improved understanding of the justice system and the challenges young people face.
- The COSA created an arena for respect, recognising and considering the complexities of individuals' lives. It further demonstrated the belief that each young person had the potential to have a good life and to make a positive contribution to society. The integrity within a COSA was transparent and reliable. Every member was held accountable and credible to those they served. There was determination for commitment to achieve positive outcomes by integrating high quality models of practice, which strived to create safe and secure environments by promoting social capital and managing risk.
- There was evidence to suggest that when given the opportunity, bonding social capital allowed the young people to feel trusted. This resulted in them feeling comfortable and feeling part of a more supportive community environment, with strong relationships and more choice in how to structure their free time. This created the necessary mechanism to develop bridging social capital. Kemshall et al. (2003) argue that bridging social capital may literally be the 'route out' of a crime pathway. However it has to be underpinned by a 'dynamic bonding social capital' that allows young people to 'navigate' and ultimately have the resources to cope, manage and make informed choices and act upon them. The PYOP model of practice specifically, with the introduction of COSA has demonstrated this.

We learned in this study that intensive support and the development of good relationships with high-risk young people, and their families and communities, emerged as being a fundamental benefit. This was further enhanced through a COSA, which gave families and communities the opportunity to become involved. In return this created links with new and diverse networks, broadened opportunities and horizons, which enhanced social capital. Practitioners in PYOP demonstrated commitment, resilience and belief in the restorative process. There was no place in their work with young people for 'giving up hope'. This practice requires time, resources, patience, teamwork, experience and skillful supervision for staff⁴.

Notes

1. A direct victim is one who has been personally affected by the offence such as the person who has been assaulted or the owner of the stolen property. An indirect victim is one who has been indirectly affected for example the manager of a retail outlet or a close relative of a direct victim.
2. *Rules of Engagement : Changing the Heart of Youth Justice*, The Centre for Social Justice 2012 ; *A Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland*, Department of Justice NI (2011) ; *Time for a Fresh Start*, Independent Commission on Youth Crime and Anti-social Behaviour (2010) ; *Making Amends : Restorative Youth Justice in Northern Ireland*, Prison Reform Trust (2009). *Evaluation of the Youth Conference Service*. Northern Ireland Office Research Branch and Statistical Series Report No : 12 October 2005. This model has also become an exemplar of good practice in Europe (*Conferencing : A Way Forward for Restorative Justice in Europe*, European Forum for Restorative Justice 2011).
3. See Nina Vaswani, (2008) Persistent Offender Profile : Focus on Bereavement. www.cjsw.ac.uk Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2005). The impact of bereavement and loss on young people www.jrf.org.uk Gwyneth Boswell (1996) Young & Dangerous Avebury ; David Smith and Christina Stern (2001) Freagarrach : an evaluation of a project for persistent young offenders. Scottish Executive Central Research Unit.
4. Since this study, the Youth Justice Agency has experienced cuts in its resources and has been unable to sustain the PYOP and while COSAs are encouraged they are rarely implemented.

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