

Dear Students of Social Work,

Social Work with Young Offenders



A common topic in social policy and social work practice is the treatment of offences by young people. The treatment ranges along a continuum and is shaped by philosophies about human nature and risk taking. Together with various understandings about adolescent development, these often interplay to shape the policy and practice in providing services to young persons who get into trouble with the law. In some situations, the pressures from society and local communities about how offences by young people should be addressed may even override the research and understanding of adolescence associated behaviours and the best practices in managing such behaviours.

Public opinion varies on the extent to which young people should be given leniency when they engage in anti-social activities or commit offences. In the current context, it appears that most people would expect them to receive some form of reprimand for such behaviour. Most countries vary in how young people are treated and where they draw the line for treating a young person as an adult. In the US, for example, states such as North Carolina prosecute all youth as adults at age 16, regardless of the severity of the crime, without diversionary rehabilitation efforts. One thing to keep in mind is that the circumstances that some young people live in make it hard for them to cope and therefore make them more prone to violence or crime. Some live in disadvantaged and depressed environments that can precipitate their getting into the justice system early, causing a downward spiral that makes effective intervention difficult. Furthermore, mental health issues and the use of drugs could also go undetected and untreated. Given this, it is challenging to lift such youths out of this cycle of violence.

One effective way to address the cycle of violence is to keep youth meaningfully engaged. In Singapore, the compulsory education system has been effective in keeping our youth meaningfully engaged. It has helped in steering them away from anti-social and unconstructive activities. Attendance in school is of high priority and students are monitored. Hence, early detection of mental health issues is far easier than in countries where attendance is of a lower priority. The compulsory national service system for male Singaporeans also helps to steer our youth in the right direction. It helps to instil discipline and keeps them away from destructive behaviour. The treatment options for youth offenders here are also varied and take into account their needs and risks. The treatment offered is holistic and requires the active involvement of key stakeholders in the young person's life, i.e. school, family, peers etc.



Working with Youth at Risk

Without being prescriptive, what then might be lessons that we can learn about working with youth at risk of anti-social behaviour or behaviour that will get them into trouble with the law? Here are perhaps some of the lessons.

1. Help youth to want to succeed.

Success is an attitude of the mind and a longing of the heart. Young people must want and learn how to succeed. The job of teachers, youth workers and social workers is to help them develop a moral compass and experience success, because nothing inspires success more than experiencing success.

2. Relationships are key.

For each youth, the early identification of at least one stable and appropriate adult relationship is the foundation on which success can be achieved. A case worker could find this difficult for some youth but we must try hard and look in the least expected places to secure such a relationship for them.

3. Programs do not replace relationships or family.

In the absence of family, we must create a family. Some of the youth who are already in the juvenile justice system may require forms of support that could play the role of “family” and provide “stable family connections”. Youth need to trust and respect an adult who is dependable, available and consistent.

4. There is no one-size-fits-all program.

We need to be mindful that working with young people is similar to working with families. Programmes need to be adapted and no matter how evidence-based they may be, we need to consider relevance and cultural sensitivity.

5. Treat mental illness or mental health concerns.

Where young people exhibit mental health concerns, assessment and treatment should be facilitated as early as possible. Treated early, these concerns need not hinder young people from achieving their goals. In addition, we need to differentiate between situational mental health concerns which could be the result of life experiences and pain, and chronic or persistent mental illness. It can be challenging and time consuming, but we need to appropriately address and facilitate treatment for these two different types of illnesses, i.e. situational or persistent.

6. Invest in long term support.

While most young persons may be able to cope after completing a program, some will require support for a longer period of time to achieve stability. They should continue to receive support and help until they stabilise, independent of programs and services. This is not easy to actualise but worth the gains for some young people, and this is more so for those with a disability.

7. Support families.

Our approach cannot be exclusively young person-focused. It must include their families and parents as they are the key to whether a young person will achieve success. Furthermore, parents or significant others should receive the support to manage such youth. Parents and families struggling to cope with young persons should have ready access to information, advice and practical help.

8. Invest in the people doing the work.

Work with young people involves active engagement and participation in activities. To sustain them in their work and to build their capability, it is worth investing in the training and development of youth workers. They should be guided to discover their talent and aptitude, and be supported to further develop in these areas. Career coaching and skills training can play an important part in helping them to structure a plan for themselves.

Finally, we need to constantly remind ourselves that these young people are often the way they are because of the various bad things that have happened to them. We should not pre-judge them but should make a concerted effort to understand and engage them. We should help them to find their purpose in life and guide them towards it.