

Article

SOCIAL DEPRIVATION AND RURAL YOUTH CRIME: YOUNG MEN IN PRISON AND THEIR EXPERIENCES OF THE "RURAL IDYLL"

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Abstract

Within rural communities, young people are highly visible and therefore more readily stigmatized and marginalized. At the same time they tend to be, paradoxically, invisible in terms of research, service delivery and policy. This article explores the experiences of young men in prison who come from rural parts of the south west of England. The results indicate that rural policy and practice have failed to meet the needs of young people, particularly those caught up in the Criminal Justice System. Findings suggest that key issues within rural communities include a lack of services, isolation and inter-generational tensions. It is suggested that these concerns exacerbate the risks of re-offending as young people return to their communities after release from prison. The need for community-wide initiatives and recommendations for policy and practice in the prison and probation services are discussed.

Keywords

young offenders; prison; resettlement; rural; social exclusion; qualitative methods

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Introduction

Characterized by the “rural idyll” (Mingay, 1989), the countryside is seen as a positive place in which to raise children (Short, 1991), idealized by parents (Valentine, 1997) and perceived by many young people as a safe place in which to live (Francis, 1999). However, while living in a rural community has been linked to well-being in adults and young children, the evidence is less persuasive when it comes to teenagers and young people (Glendinning *et al*, 2003). Indeed within rural communities, young people are often constructed as *anti-idyll*: seen to introduce disquiet, crime and immorality (Matthews *et al*, 1999; Kraack and Kenway, 2002).

Eleven million people, over a fifth of the population of England, live and work in rural areas. Despite the perceived rural idyll, 25 per cent live in or on the margins of poverty (ACRE, 2004). Low wages, under-employment, inadequate housing and substance misuse are everyday realities for large numbers of people, yet academics and policy makers tend to concentrate on urban issues and locate the countryside on the margins of their work (Commins, 2004; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004). Young people have typically been associated with urban problems (Matthews *et al*, 2000) and little research attention has been paid to rural youth (Philo, 1992). Indeed within rural communities, young people are often constructed as *anti-idyll*: seen to introduce disquiet, crime and immorality (Matthews *et al*, 1999; Kraack and Kenway, 2002).

Youth crime in the rural idyll

In contemporary criminology, the countryside is significant mainly because of its absence (Moody, 1999). While there are comparatively low levels of crime among young people in rural areas (Mirrlees-Black, 1998), there is also less tolerance of anti-social behaviour (Day *et al*, 2001). Within the research literature, an assumption is made that young offenders are typically urban males (Svensson, 2004), and just as gender differences are rarely explored (Smith and Paternoster, 1987), urban/rural differences are seldom considered (Barclay *et al*, 2004; Carswell *et al*, 2004). Although rural youth crime has received relatively little attention, some notable exceptions do exist. For example, in 1997 NACRO published “Hanging around the bus stop”, a report that drew on local crime prevention initiatives as case studies and developed a set of policy and practice recommendations. However, the majority of studies on crime, exclusion, probation and rehabilitation fail to incorporate a rural element, and even fewer draw directly on young people’s own viewpoints within this context (Philip, 2001; Brown and Collis, 2004).

Definitions of rurality

While the rural–urban division may seem relatively straightforward at first glance, the construction of rural as antithetical to urban life (Share, 1995;

cited by Kraack and Kenway, 2002) may bear little resemblance to the definitions of rurality used within the rural communities themselves, where such a dichotomy is less obvious. Various levels of rurality exist (Brown, 2003) and rural communities differ from one another (Pugh, 2004). For instance, a small but thriving market town with a good range of facilities has little in common with a remote farming community with no school, shop or public transport, yet both are referred to as rural. To meet this diversity, there has been a call for recognition of "a more plural rural" (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004), and as this recognition develops, so too have further sub-classifications (such as remote rural or accessible rural). However, researchers and policy makers continue to use different definitions of rurality in their work, drawing on classifications from a range of indices and often failing to define their own understanding of what constitutes rural.

The problem with defining rurality is an issue that has been widely debated within academia (Farmer *et al*, 2001). Anderson (1999) demonstrates how a seemingly straightforward concept becomes difficult to define once one begins to explore the boundary between urban and rural. "Areas can be defined as rural in a number of ways – for example, on the basis of settlements below a certain size, population density or employment in 'rural' activities such as agriculture" (Anderson, 1999, p 46). Population density is probably the most widely used measure of rurality (Martin *et al*, 2000) that, in addition to distinguishing urban from rural areas, can be used to discriminate between different types of rural areas. In the present research, the same criteria of rurality is used to that of Phillimore and Reading (1992), whereby towns/villages with a population of below 5,000 are considered sufficiently rural for inclusion. However, the author recognizes the diversity within this category, and in presenting the data, attention is paid to the characteristics of the locations referred to in the case studies.

The research region: rural south west England

The popular image of the south west of England is of a region of traditional family farms, attractive coastlines and idyllic villages. It is a representation actively promoted by many of those who live and work in the area, as tourism is a major industry across the region. However, this image conflicts sharply with the reality exposed by recent studies conducted with young people in the south west. These have revealed high levels of drug use (Wilson and Campbell, 1998), homelessness (Gunner, 1999), teenage pregnancies (Duffell and Cooke, 2001), poverty (Davis and Ridge, 1997) and transport difficulties (Storey and Brannen, 2000). In remote areas, the sparsity of the population leads to particular problems of rural deprivation and many people live in relative poverty in isolated situations. Crime levels in the south west are low compared to other areas of the country, with a clear intra-regional pattern of urban centres having the highest rates of crime,¹ yet as with other rural areas, tolerance of anti-social behaviour is low (Day *et al*, 2001).

Methods

Interviews were conducted with male prisoners aged 17–21 who had, before sentencing, been living in rural parts of the counties of Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.

The research prison

The research prison is a young offender institution, imprisoning sentenced offenders from across the country. Interviews were conducted between August and October 2004 and were guided by an interview schedule, with the following being examples of the topics covered:

- Social networks and friendship groups.
- Recreation and leisure.
- Patterns of offending.
- Description of and involvement with the community.
- Hopes, fears and aspirations for the future.

Interviews focused on the participants' experiences of rurality before their prison sentence, as well as their plans for life after release. Interviews were semi-structured, following an interview schedule but flexible enough to allow the participant to lead the direction of the discussion. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used to analyse the qualitative data produced from the interview transcripts.

Interview participants

Participants were recruited through the induction, resettlement and education programmes running within the research prison. Within these groups, those who matched the criteria (having been resident in a small town or village in Somerset, Dorset, Devon or Cornwall before custody) were approached to take part, and of these, all agreed to participate. While one can not claim this sample to be representative of all young prisoners from the rural south west, the recruitment procedure was designed to ensure as wide a range of participants as possible, recruiting from a range of locations within the prison and including those at different stages of their sentences. A total of 22 individual interviews were carried out, with each typically lasting approximately 40 min. Ages ranged from 17 to 21, with an average age of 19 years. Reflecting national trends (Farrant and Meek, 2005), many of the prisoners interviewed were serving short-term sentences of 12 months or less. All participants were male and all identified their ethnic origin as white.²

Analysis

Interviews transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis and two levels of analysis were utilized. The first level involved identifying common content

categories, as well as more specific themes and sub-themes. The second level of analysis involved looking for connections – or “metathemes” (Tesch, 1987) – across these categories, themes and sub-themes.

Results

In analysis, a number of prominent themes emerged from the interview data. These themes fell into one of three superordinate categories: *from community to custody*; *from custody to community*; and *the effects of early upheaval*. Before considering each of these themes in more detail, a series of individual case studies are presented, used to illustrate the experiences of young men from rural areas who are in prison.

Case studies

Callum's³ story: *Such a small town they're always writing about me.*

Callum's experiences relate to themes of visibility and reputation within the community and the practical issues associated with public transport in remote areas.

Callum (age 20) was from a small coastal town in Devon. He got a “bad reputation” when he was younger (for petty theft) and felt that he was unable to shake off his negative image. Callum was keen to start a new life but expected that he would always be seen in his community as the troublemaker he was in his early teens. His prison sentence came about after he breached his license conditions near the end of his 2-year probation order, which was issued when he assaulted a police officer. Callum was pessimistic about being able to make a fresh start in his community and he believed that his local paper was partly to blame (*such a small town they're always writing about me*). His main concern after release was the practicality of attending his probation meetings. With the probation office situated an hour away by train, Callum had previously missed appointments when the train was running late.

Nick's story: *I don't want to go back like that... just wasting my life away.*

Nick's resettlement concerns focused on alcohol, drugs and the influence of peer groups, further exacerbated in the context of a small isolated community.

Nick (age 19) was from a small coastal town in Dorset. He described getting his 18-month sentence as a “turning point” as his self-identified problem with alcohol and drug use had been addressed during his time in prison:

A lot of people are on them and my friends are on them. Now I've been in here I feel so much better being off all that stuff and I've got to know me, myself, without being on anything... I don't want to go back like that, spending all my money on alcohol and just wasting my life away.

Nick was concerned about returning to his peer group (*just got to choose the right friends now to hang around with*) but described how he was planning to use his electronic tag to his advantage:

I can say no to people, it's [the tag] an excuse.

Although Nick felt that he had dealt with some of his problems while in prison, he was concerned about returning to a peer group where drug and alcohol use was prevalent and a community with few support services in place. Nick was also worried about his "bad reputation" causing problems after his return to the community since everybody in his small neighbourhood now knew he had been in prison.

Roy's story: *Too much sun, sea and boredom.*

Roy's concerns about the transition from custody to community were characterized by community attitudes.

Roy (age 20) grew up in a small Dorset coastal town. Nearing the end of a 2-year sentence, he was concerned about coping after release:

I've been in prison two years and I'm so used to what's in here, then when I get out there it's going to be madness. I might not be able to handle it.

Roy felt that he could not return to his home town, so he had arranged to live in a large town on the south coast after his release:

New start. Complete new start. No friends, no family.

Roy described the lack of things to do in his Dorset home:

We'd always hang round on the seafront, go find somewhere to skate. But apart from that no, completely boring. Too much for the old people. Too much sun, sea and boredom.

Matthew's story: *Wherever we went the adults were moaning.*

Matthew's reflections on his offending focused on alcohol use, resulting from boredom within the community and poor relations with older residents.

Matthew (19) was from Devon and nearing the end of a 2-year sentence. He talked about his drinking problem (all of his offences were alcohol-related) and how he had started drinking at the age of 13 years due to boredom:

There's not a lot there. Where I live they only got one thing for the young people to do and that was on a Monday night. Go down to the local youth club. During the week there was nothing else there. So to make time go past it was just me and my mates sitting on corner drinking. Obviously if there was some-

thing else to do during the week I wouldn't be sat there drinking. I could have been doing something else. There was nothing else to do so we'd all sit on the corner have loads of drink and that. Yeah, pass the time.

Interviewer: *What would you have liked?*

Just something to occupy yourself, something you could get into. Everywhere you went there was always 'no you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't sit there, you can't sit here'. Wherever we went, the adults were moaning.

Chris's story: *Half the trouble is just down to being bored.*

Chris' account referred to the need for further opportunities for young people who were isolated and unable to access the services and provision offered to peers in more urban settings.

Chris, aged 19, was nearing the end of a 2½ year sentence for driving offences. His family had moved to Somerset when he was 5, but they were not made to feel welcome by the community:

When we first lived there we were the only family on the street. You've got elderly people that want a quiet life and then you've got four kids running up the street.

Chris described how his driving-related offences were related to a strongly felt need to get away from the local area:

I just can't stay away from cars. That's probably going to be the biggest thing for me when I get out because I've got a four year ban now, it's just basically staying away from cars...The main thing was my independence. Because everything that's good is out the area.

In describing life for young people in his community, Chris described boredom as being the major contributory factor in getting involved in the justice system (*half the trouble is down to being bored*):

There is nothing. All we did is just walked round the streets, I mean that was basically it. Caused a bit of trouble to have a bit of fun, stuff like that. But there ain't really, even for the kids today there's nothing.

Chris was anxious about his life after release, particularly in terms of returning to his peer group:

When I get out I just want to get on with my life and sort it out. If I carry on going the way I'm going I ain't gonna get nowhere. I just can't wait to make

a fresh start. I don't want to go back to too many of my old mates 'cos I seem to slide back to my old routine which I don't want to do. I don't want to only know this I want to know other things as well.

In order to achieve his goals, Chris clearly needed support. He was frustrated by the limited facilities that his community offered young people and he described needing activities to keep him occupied.

Jack's story: The atmosphere down there is just boring so I'd get the drugs out.

In Jack's idyllic tourist-destination town, opportunities for socially excluded young people were characterized by gambling, alcohol and drug use.

Jack (19) was from a small Cornish coastal town. He was serving his second prison sentence and had an 18-month-old child. He had no qualifications and described how boredom led to gambling, which in turn led to his involvement in crime:

Boring really. Nothing to do. I got excluded from school, just hanging around with a couple of people older with me. Always in trouble. I only got in trouble 'cos I was bored... Nothing to do, nowhere to go. The arcade was probably the only place. Big group of us used to hang out there. Gambling away then the money'd be gone, then we go back to robbing again. Go on the rob, in the arcade, spend all your money, have no money left, back on the rob, back in the arcade, try and win it back.

Describing his community, Jack portrayed a desolate scene:

There's nothing to do. On a weekend, everyone would always get drunk, and drugs, and causing trouble. There used to be a youth club when I was little but I ended up getting banned from there, for drinking on the premises...the atmosphere down there is just boring so I'd get the drugs out.

Cody's story: Basically young people need opportunities ... a road that leads somewhere.

Cody's account focussed on the conflict, drug use and lack of opportunities within his community.

Cody, age 18, was nearing the end of his first sentence (18 months). While he was in prison, his girlfriend had given birth to their child. Cody spent the first 15 years of his life in a remote Dorset village and at 13 he started "hanging about" in the small neighbouring town. Although a picturesque tourist destination, Cody described his community as being "*quite a big heroin town*". He explained how he and his friends started using drugs, taking cannabis, amphetamines, ecstasy and crack cocaine:

One thing leads to another, when you got nothing to do you do it.

When he was 15, Cody's family moved to another small town 10 miles away, but he had difficulty making new friends:

I didn't really mix with them, ended up fighting. Went out a couple of times down there but 'cos you ain't from there you end up fighting don't you.

Cody spoke passionately about how he felt that young people in his area were not being given enough opportunities:

Basically young people need opportunities and they're not getting it... Just like a road that leads somewhere, an opportunity where it could lead somewhere. I didn't have any experience when I was younger to find something I liked, to stick at it and do it. And I see it now, not many people have got that either and because they haven't got that they just go out and do what I did. And I think it's a waste of life really. It's just, it's crap.

Recurring themes

From community to custody

This theme was concerned with the pathways into offending, from the experiences of growing up in a rural area to becoming involved in crime and receiving a prison sentence. Within this category, the following sub-themes clearly emerged.

Boredom

There was evidence from within the interview data that much of the youth crime in rural areas is a result of boredom:

Not much to do really for young people. All you've got is go and either get pissed or go to the arcade (Craig, 18, Devon⁴).

Always in trouble. I only got in trouble 'cos I was bored... Nothing to do, nowhere to go (Jack, 19, Cornwall).

In order to counteract this boredom, many of the participants were clear about what rural youth need in the community:

Just put something there for them. They're always moaning about them getting drunk and that, well give them something to do, they've nothing else to do (Craig, 18, Devon).

Just a bit of fun for the kids like 'cos there's nothing at all in the village for them. I think myself kids in little villages are more prone to go off the rails a bit more,

'cos there's nothing to do and there's more boredom (Rick, 20, Somerset).

Visibility

Greater visibility contributes to both the positive and negative aspects of rural life. For some, the ability to recognize and be recognized by the rest of the community can be reassuring and help to bind the community together. However, for those who feel themselves to be marginalized, as many of the young people in this report did, such visibility only serves to exacerbate problems:

In a big town you're just another face. But in a little village you hear people two miles down the road talking about you (Rick, 20, Somerset).

Like you do something, you'd be surprised within ten minutes everybody knows (Chris, 19, Somerset).

From custody to community

This theme explored the issues facing young men in the transition from prison back to the community. The participants were well aware of the environments to which they would be returning after release and were also aware of the fact that having served a prison sentence, members of the community were likely to view them with renewed suspicion.

Reputation

Young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system felt that it would be especially hard to shake off their reputation and that they would always be known as the trouble makers within their communities, even if they were determined to change:

Once you got a record they gonna be keeping an eye out for you (Rick, 20, Somerset).

Before I was just living day by day. But I've had enough of that now. Yeah I've changed a lot... but I've got a bad reputation (Chris, 19, Somerset).

Unable to return to own community

Several interviewees described how they felt unable to return to their small, close-knit communities after release from prison and that their only choice was to move away. They spoke of their concerns about being excluded from the community and unable to get on with life since everyone would know that they had been in prison. For example, even though it would take him away from the family support that he needed, Roy felt that he could not return to his hometown after prison because of the difficulties he would face in resettling there:

New start. Complete new start. No friends, no family (Roy, 20, Dorset).

Early upheaval

An overall theme that emerged from the interviews was the disruption caused by moving. Some participants described their parents' decision to re-locate to the south west as an attempt to raise their children in a better place, but paradoxically the move was linked by several speakers to their offending behaviour. Dean (19) was 13 when his parents decided to move to Somerset from a city in the north of England:

For a better life really, get away from all the trouble and stuff.

However, for Dean this experience served as a catalyst for further problems:

I thought I could get back [north] if I got kicked out of school.

Likewise, Mick (20) traced his disruptive behaviour to his family's move to Dorset:

Since I moved house, my behaviour changed a lot. That's why I changed. Fell out with my family, come in and out of prison. Heavy on drugs and alcohol. Just lost it.

Others, such as Luke and Cody, attributed their disruptive behaviour to becoming an "outsider" to the peer group:

It's just when I came down here I started getting into more trouble...Just didn't fit in (Luke, 21).

'Cos you ain't from there you end up fighting don't you (Cody, 18).

Based on reports of better health, education and lower levels of crime, parents may be right to expect that an improved quality of life awaits them and their families in the rural south west, but the disruption of moving, changing schools and entering a new peer group, coupled with entry into an isolated community that is suspicious of strangers and even more suspicious of teenagers is bound to be problematic. If families were moving into communities, which valued their young residents, encouraged participation and empowerment and provided adequate facilities and resources, perhaps the rural idyll would be a little more attainable.

Summary

The accounts of young men in prison presented in this article have provided a detailed description of some of the issues facing young people in rural commu-

nicities, both at the onset of involvement in offending behaviour and as attempts are made to re-build lives following a prison sentence. High visibility and isolation compounds the problems many young men face on leaving prison and the existence of fewer services can leave rural ex-offenders particularly vulnerable. The additional support requirements of this group of young people need to be considered by both the prison and the probation services and a better understanding of the experiences and needs of rural offenders is required in order to develop more effective crime prevention strategies.

The findings point to some clear recommendations for policy and practice in rural areas, particularly in relation to working with socially excluded young people. Reflecting previous research findings (Little and Leyshon, 1998; Shucksmith, 2004) of utmost importance is the provision of designated meeting places, spaces for socializing, leisure activities, training and access to services. In accordance with the need for better provision for young people in rural areas, local planning and decision-making bodies should acknowledge the needs of their young residents. All levels of local government need to recognize that young people are part of the community and deserve engagement and services just like everybody else.

As well as identifying a need for dedicated facilities and youth service provision, the findings also highlight the importance of addressing rural community dynamics. A prominent theme throughout the study was the significance of community attitudes in pathways into offending as well as desistance from crime after release from prison. Inter-generational tensions appear to be of particular relevance here, suggesting that above and beyond the need for better youth facilities, community-wide initiatives that bring together older residents with young people, particularly those who are typically excluded from community events, would have a positive impact. This implication presents an opportunity to develop innovative and imaginative community programmes, particularly those targeting young people at-risk of offending, as well as those leaving prison.

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Notes

1 http://www.swo.org.uk/State_of_the_South_West/crime.asp.

2 While ethnic minorities are over-represented within the prison system, they are under-represented in rural areas, particularly in the south west.

3 All names have been changed.

4 Participants' age at the time of interview and county of residence before sentencing.

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