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Challenging myths about young people and organised crime through collaborative research

Naomi Stanton, Middlesex University

Contact email: n.stanton@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract This paper outlines how a project conducted with the Home Office to develop educational resources about young people and organised crime was able to avoid reinforcing misleading myths. Three key myths about young people and crime are explored that emerged from the consultations with young people and practitioners involved with the project. These myths are: that young people face a significant choice/dilemma moment before becoming involved with organised crime; that young people engage with organised crime out of a sense of entitlement; that there is such a thing as a typical organised crime offender among young people. In challenging these myths, the paper asserts that young people are vulnerable to exploitation rather than simply criminal, that young people's engagement with organised crime is more complex than simply stemming from greed or laziness and that it would be misleading to stigmatise young people from minority groups as typical offenders. The key argument of the paper is for the importance of collaboration with young people and practitioners when developing resources for them. This argument can also be applied more widely to indicate the importance of such collaboration when determining any policies, practices and interventions that will affect young people.

Keywords: young people; organised crime; vulnerability; collaboration; myths and assumptions

Introduction

This paper argues for the importance of collaboration in research and resource development to avoid reinforcing myths and stereotypes. It outlines how collaboration with young people and practitioners before developing resources on young people and organised crime allowed for a more authentic educational toolkit to be created.

The aim of the project was to develop educational resources about organised crime for practitioners who work with young people (a commitment made in section 5.14 of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, 2013). The project was commissioned by the Home Office and through the collaborative process we involved a range of partners in organisations that work with young people. My

own role, through a grant agreement between the Home Office and YMCA George Williams College (my previous employer), was to recruit participants for and co-facilitate the consultation and evaluation stages of the project as well as supporting the development of the resource. The consultations and evaluations were facilitated by YMCA George Williams College, the Home Office and Navigator Research.

This paper will focus primarily on some of the qualitative findings from the consultation phase of the project in order to demonstrate how collaboration with young people and practitioners enabled us to identify the myths and assumptions about young people's engagement with crime that we needed to avoid reinforcing. Please note that the particular discussion and analysis presented here is my own and does not represent the official view of the Home Office or other partners involved in the project. The paper outlines three myths about young people's engagement with crime that were challenged by the young people and practitioners we engaged with and explains how the final resource was able to avoid reinforcing these myths.

The Serious and Organised Crime Toolkit is available at www.infed.org/mobi/soctoolkit. The toolkit includes a film for use with young people (Consequences), a film for practitioners explaining what serious and organised crime is and a workbook with suggested session plans and further information on young people and organised crime.

Research sample and method

The purpose of the research carried out with practitioners and young people was to support the development of the educational resources. It was conducted in three main stages:

Consultative

Two workshops were conducted with practitioners who work with young people in a range of sectors including youth work, youth offending, education, secure institutions, probation, police and social work. One workshop took place in London and the other in Liverpool. In total, 42 practitioners attended these workshops.

Three unstructured focus groups were conducted with young people in London. One group were accessed via an open access youth club session, another via their youth offending worker and the other through a targeted youth club session for young people considered to be 'at risk' of educational or social exclusion. Through these groups, 19 young people were consulted. The sample of young people therefore included both young people in the primary target group for the preventative resource and those who had already offended. This allowed us to gain realistic perspectives from young people who had offended and ideas on what would engage and have impact from those who had not. The sample did not include any young people who were not engaged with a youth worker or other professional. Therefore the findings can only be seen to represent young

people who are already engaged with a trusted professional and, as such, may present a biased view on this particular aspect. As the toolkit was for practitioners to use with young people, it made sense (as well as them being easier to access) to consult with young people that practitioners were engaging.

Developmental

An advisory group of 7 practitioners was formed. This group met once in person to comment on initial ideas for the resource that emerged from the consultations. The rest of the contact with this group was via email. Through this, they commented on drafts of the script and the various edits of the main film, checked language and story-line with the young people they had access to, and responded to other questions that emerged during the development of the resources.

One young ex-offender also attended the advisory group meeting and was later interviewed in-depth as part of the process of developing the script for the film for use with young people. Whilst this is a limited engagement with young people at this stage (primarily due to a restricted timescale), the start of the developmental stage overlapped with the end of consultative stage. The groups of young people engaged as part of the consultations commented on developmental aspects of the project such as ideas for the script and the story-line as well as suitable language. As mentioned above, the advisory group then checked aspects of the emerging toolkit with their young people as it was developed further.

An additional group of 15 youth work and social pedagogy student practitioners were shown the first full edit of the film for comment and feedback.

Evaluative

The evaluation of the final toolkit involved the following aspects:

- Large scale survey sent to 6,000 practitioners asking them to look at the toolkit and respond (88 responses);
- Targeted survey sent to 50 practitioners asking them to use the toolkit with young people and respond (18 responses – used with 190 young people);
- 4 focus groups with 37 practitioners who work with young people in Liverpool, Manchester and London;
- 4 observed sessions of practitioners using the resource with young people in Greater Manchester and London (used with 70 young people).

The discussion in this paper draws primarily on the qualitative themes from the consultative stage of the research and the three myths explored in the paper emerged from this consultative phase of the project. There is also some reference to the evaluation to demonstrate the success of the toolkit in challenging these myths.

Defining serious and organised crime

The Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (Home Office, 2013) is split into four key areas (the 4 Ps). These are Prevent, Protect, Pursue and Prepare. The commitment to develop educational resources for use with young people falls under the Prevent area of the Strategy and, within this, under the commitments made around Education.

Organised crime is defined by the Strategy as 'serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain' (Home Office, 2013: 14). Serious crime is defined as 'crime, which may not always be "organised" but requires a national response, notably many aspects of fraud and child sexual exploitation' (Home Office, 2013:13). There is clear overlap between serious crime and organised crime. As can be seen from these definitions, organised crime is also serious crime. Serious crime, however, is not always organised. Child sexual exploitation, for example, is serious and also often, but not necessarily, organised. Organised crime involves larger networks than something that operates at just the local level. It involves a number of layers around the organised criminal group at the centre and is usually national and often international in reach. Therefore, organised crime as defined by the strategy is distinct from 'gangs' as we know them at the local level (Home Office, 2013). A gang is not, in itself, an organised criminal group as per the definition. Existing gangs may, however, be utilised by organised criminal groups to, for example, distribute drugs within a local area.

It is important to note here that there has been some challenge to the policy definition of organised crime as highly organised and carefully hierarchical, with a 'mafia' type group at the centre. In particular, Hobbs (2013) has suggested that the networks are 'messier' and less clearly structured than popular definitions suggest and that the lead perpetrators may have been over-glamorised. Based on anthropological research in East London, Hobbs (2013) suggests that what we typically view as *organised* crime is usually more opportunistic than the term suggests.

From the outset of the educational resources project, it was clear that it would be a challenge to produce resources on organised crime that could represent the full range of activity that falls under the category. The practitioners involved in the consultation stage told us that 'drug running' was the most common way the young people they worked with came into contact with organised crime. They also felt that young people were largely unaware of the larger organised crime network that they might be associating themselves with by getting involved in 'drug running'. This supports Hobbs' (2013) assertion discussed above that the network is 'messier' than often suggested and, for many who become involved, more opportunistic than organised. For this reason, it was decided to focus on 'drug running' as the concrete example of how young people might engage with organised crime in the film that was created for use with them. It was also felt that a key aim of the resource would be to inform young people (and

practitioners) of the levels and layers that exist beyond their own engagement with organised crime.

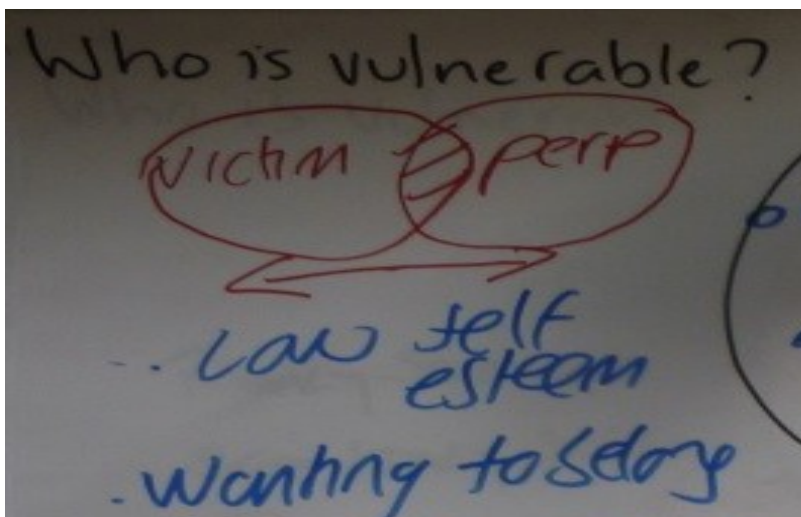
The rest of this paper outlines three key myths about young people and organised crime that were challenged, as a result of the research carried out with young people and practitioners. It also explores how these myths were not perpetuated by the toolkit that was subsequently developed. The three myths emerged from the consultations with practitioners as something they explicitly sought to challenge. This was reinforced more implicitly by the consultations with young people, who did not articulate the specific myths as clearly but, who sought to portray young people who engage with organised crime in ways that emphasise the complexities they face rather than drawing on simplistic interpretations.

Myth 1: The big choice/dilemma moment

One of the most crucial findings of the consultations was that young people are viewed by practitioners as vulnerable to exploitation rather than as simply choosing criminality. Whilst the practitioners emphasised the importance of young people having the appropriate knowledge to make 'informed choices', it was also revealed that in many cases, young people may not even perceive there to be a choice, let alone feel equipped with the knowledge to make the 'right' choice. Practitioners discussed how young people may be asked to do things by people they view as friends, who they perhaps already 'owe a favour' to, and that those that get them involved are quick to entrap the young people through debt owed. For example, a police representative explained how young people involved in drug dealing may be subject to raids of their 'stash' that have actually been set up by the wider criminal group to get them into debt and ensure they remain involved. Therefore, this lack of perception of there being choice can prevent young people from being able to disengage from their involvement with organised crime. It may also be how young people become involved in the first place. For example, one thirteen year old young woman explained to us that when walking through her estate and seeing a well-known older boy who told her to 'walk with me like you're my sister', she did not feel able to refuse his request. She also did not realise immediately that she was serving as a form of protection because he was carrying drugs and there were police officers at the end of the street. This young woman did not feel there was the option to say 'no' to an older boy who was feared by her peers and with whom she had to continue to associate with as he lived on her estate. This subtle request to become involved demonstrates the lack of 'dilemma moment' for some young people. Therefore, young people need to be aware of the moments in which they may become involved for the first time, however subtle, in order to retain control over what happens next. This suggests that there is an overlap between *preventing* young people from engaging with organised crime and *protecting* them from exploitation by criminal groups.

Hughes (2011) compared the responses to anti-social behaviour in England and Victoria, Australia. He found that, in England, policy and practice takes a 'law and

order' approach, focusing primarily on the crime. However, in Victoria, Hughes found that much more concern was placed on what were seen as the vulnerabilities of the perpetrator. Therefore preventative interventions in Victoria have more focus on meeting the needs of people who might be vulnerable to becoming perpetrators; whereas in England they focus on preventing behaviours. Hughes concludes that there is both a 'need for caution in the application of a law and order discourse, and the potential for an alternative approach that recognizes and responds to vulnerability by promoting positive behaviour and offering opportunities for development' (Hughes, 2011: 405). Whilst there should be some caution taken in applying findings about anti-social behaviour prevention to that relating to organised crime, this does appear to support the finding from our consultations with practitioners that young people at risk of engagement in crime should be seen as vulnerable rather than simply criminal:



Flipchart from consultation activity asking practitioners who is likely to engage with organised crime and why

The film developed for use with young people (Consequences) attempted to portray the complexity of young people's initiation into organised crime. For example, Sean (the main character in the film) explains how JC had bought several takeaways for him and his friends and given him an iPhone before he was asked to carry a package for the first time. This demonstrates how, by the time Sean was asked to be involved, he already 'owed a favour' to JC. Similarly, once he is more deeply involved, Sean becomes in debt to JC when his 'stash' is robbed and he therefore becomes trapped.

The evaluation stage of the project suggests that this sense of young people's vulnerability was effectively communicated through watching 'Consequences', as demonstrated by the following comment from a teacher who used the toolkit with a class of young people.

They said [organised crime] wasn't simple and involved a lot of planning and people. They were concerned about how it affects your future. They

talked a lot about pressure and how Sean was a little person in the whole scheme. They talked about 'king pins' when discussing the suppliers of drugs and how people have 'leverage' over others (Respondent, targeted survey).

It was important to emphasise within the toolkit that it is more complex than a young person having made a 'bad choice' and needing guidance to reform their choices; it is about ensuring young people are equipped with the knowledge that they even *have a choice* and enabling them to identify the moments in which these subtle choices might be made. The toolkit supports this through encouraging discussion and reflection on whether JC is a real friend, at which points Sean might have acted differently and portraying the way in which the young person's level of engagement with organised crime as well as the consequences can spiral out of control when they become involved. The toolkit recognises that young people may be vulnerable to subtle forms of grooming and exploitation and seeks to better inform and equip them to recognise and respond accordingly. In this way, it serves not only a Prevent purpose but also overlaps with the Protect area of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy.

Myth 2: The sense of entitlement

A prevalent societal discourse about working class young people over recent years has been that they have a false sense of entitlement. This pervasive discourse portrays young people who engage in criminal activity as operating from greed and laziness and does not take account of any wider structural inequalities they may face. A focus on young people's individual failings rather than wider inequalities has been documented across time - from the nineteenth century until today (Pitts, 2011; Stanton & Wenham, 2013). However, it is levelled only at the working classes and the notion of a 'culture of entitlement' is contrasted with the idea of a 'culture of merit', that ignores inequalities and suggests any differences in levels of success between different groups of people is due to moral rather than structural differences (Pitts, 2011). The view of young criminals is therefore that they are simply morally depraved without taking account of any inequalities or deprivation they may face (Lightowlers, 2015). It is illustrated clearly in the dominant response to the riots of summer 2011. David Cameron, in a speech immediately following the events, stated:

Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised (Cameron, 2011 cf. Pitts, 2011: 82)

As well as this notion of a 'culture of entitlement' being challenged by academics (Lightowler, 2015; Pitts, 2011; Stanton & Wenham, 2013), the young people and practitioners who engaged with our consultation process painted a more

complex picture about the range of factors that might be involved when young people engage with crime. Both young people and practitioners emphasised that young people who become engaged with activities such as 'drug running' often do so, not just to make money for themselves, but also to provide for their families. The young people and practitioners *were* aware of a 'sense of easy money' that could act as an incentive to become involved, as demonstrated by the comment from one of the evaluation surveys below:

The biggest practice challenge is how to offer young people in deprived areas with few support networks real alternatives to 'making a bit of money from running' and then supporting young people to walk away from criminal activity when they have so little to lose, especially if they already have or are likely to gain a criminal record. (Respondent, large-scale survey).

However, as demonstrated by the comment above, this 'sense of easy money' was alongside an awareness of the wider economic context in which employment can feel elusive as well as aspirations and hope for future prospects being particularly low for the most vulnerable young people.

The young people and practitioners in the consultations emphasised that the toolkit needed to acknowledge these more complex factors and it was overwhelmingly felt that focusing on the impacts on the young person's family would be more effective than focusing on penal consequences. The young offenders group, particularly, told us that they were less concerned about the impact their involvement might have on their own lives than on their families, with a sense of protectiveness and responsibility felt, in most cases, for their mothers and younger siblings. The focus of the film for use with young people on the impact on family rather than on penal consequences is supported by Darke (2011) who argues that a 'prevent as enforcement' approach has been over-used in youth justice and is ineffective.

'Consequences', the film for use with young people, therefore emphasises both Sean's concern for his family and his mother's concern for him and his siblings. For example, the film starts and ends with Sean discussing how his mother worries. He discusses within the film how his mother was not always around because of health problems, meaning she was 'in and out of hospital'. This emphasised the complexities and offered a more nuanced account than the simplistic discourse of neglectful parenting that often sits alongside the entitlement discourse. This reflected the tensions discussed by the young offenders group in the consultation stage in that most of them were aware - at least to a certain extent - that their parents cared for them but also identified that they had not always received the care and support they needed. The film also refers to Sean giving money to his mother and to her losing her job, portraying how a sense of financial responsibility for his family impacted on his engagement with organised crime. As the film progresses, it shows how Sean's engagement with 'drug running' makes things worse rather than better for his

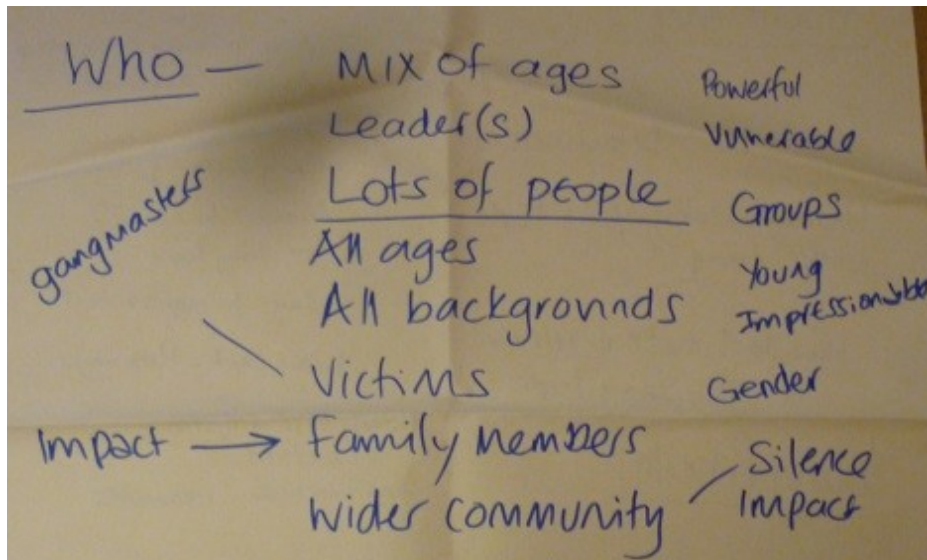
family as his mother's health worsens, his siblings are put into foster care for a period of time and his brother is also drawn into 'drug running' and is eventually stabbed by JC.

The focus on the impact on the young person's family was praised across the different methods of the evaluation, from the focus groups, surveys and observations. 95% of practitioners who responded to the particular question within the large-scale survey rated 'Consequences' as either 'very effective' or 'quite effective' at communicating 'the impact of serious organised crime on the young person's family'. Young people's feedback after the observations was that the film was realistic and impactful. A practitioner who used the resource with young people and fed back via the targeted survey also stated that 'Young people found the film quite realistic and said it made them think about the impact of serious crime and mentioned especially the impact on their families' (Respondent, targeted survey).

Myth 3: The typical offender

Organised crime can involve a vast range of forms of crime including: drug trafficking, people trafficking, sexual exploitation, cybercrime, fraud and other financial crimes - where these activities are organised within the networks associated with an organised criminal group. Within this, it also involves people of a vast range of ages, ethnicities and class groups (Francis et al, 2013). For example, fraud and financial crime involve a very different group of people than drug trafficking. Home Office strategies to prevent organised crime have therefore targeted a diverse range of groups from solicitors and accountants to the young people and practitioners involved with this particular project.

Within the consultation workshops, we asked practitioners to help us identify realistic characters that we could use within the film-based resource. This was an incredibly difficult task due to the level of diversity within organised crime networks which are large, far-reaching and encompass a range of people of different backgrounds. We asked them to focus on that within the realms of their professional experience:



Flipchart from consultation activity asking practitioners what groups of people are involved with organised crime

The image above demonstrates the level of discomfort felt by practitioners about labelling a particular group. The practitioners told us they were reluctant to reinforce labels about young people and particularly young offenders. They were keen that the resources developed should avoid reinforcing stigma, particularly of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups.

Recent quantitative research commissioned by the Home Office on organised crime in the UK goes some way towards identifying who is most likely to get involved in organised crime. The Home Office study, conducted in 2013, looked at 'criminal careers in organised crime'. Interestingly, organised crime offenders were found to be older than general offenders, with the average age at which the 'inclusion offence' was committed for the specific category of organised crime being 32 years old (Francis et al, 2013). Only 1% of organised crime offenders were under 18 years of age, compared with 19% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013). However, it should be noted here that the methodology for the study applied strict rules in terms of which offences needed to be committed for the person to be considered an organised crime offender. Therefore, lower level activities such as 'drug running', as identified in our consultations as the main method of engagement by young people with organised crime, would not have qualified them for this category. This suggests that young people are unlikely to be 'career criminals' (or the senior perpetrators) within organised criminal networks. However, as previously discussed, they may be vulnerable to exploitation by such groups - and even viewed as a temporary or 'disposable' commodity.

In terms of ethnicity, 56% of organised crime offenders in the study discussed above were found to be White European. This is lower than for general crime offenders where 81% are White European (Francis et al, 2013). 15% of organised crime offenders were Asian compared with 5% for general crime. 23% were Black compared with 8% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013). This

demonstrates that there is more diversity among organised crime than general crime offenders but that White Europeans are still the majority. In regards to gender, 95% of organised crime offenders were male compared with 78% for general crime (Francis et al, 2013).

Therefore, any assumption that the typical offender is young and/or from a BAME background is flawed, both in relation to organised crime and, even more so, crime more generally. The most obvious way to avoid stigma and stereotyping within the toolkit being developed as part of this project was to ensure that the resources portrayed the diverse levels and layers of organised crime. This was challenging as the consultation activities found that case studies, specific examples and personal narratives are more likely to engage young people than generalised descriptions or statistics.

Whilst the film for use with young people is careful not to stigmatise minority groups (by choosing, for example, to portray the main character as White British), it does focus on one fictional character throughout. Sean is the only character seen on camera but his narrative refers to others involved in the activities he engages with. Within this, the attempt was made to ensure that the wider networks and layers within organised crime are alluded to. Sean refers not just to JC, the person with whom he has direct contact, but on more than one occasion he mentions the people that JC has to report to. Other moments within the film also allude to the wider networks. For example, when Sean's 'stash' of drugs is robbed while he is not at home, he states 'It's like they knew I had just had a drop off'. The discussion prompts within the toolkit encourage practitioners to facilitate discussion about what this means and whether Sean is being deliberately put into debt by the wider criminal group. Later on in the film, Sean relates his involvement with organised crime to a wildlife programme he has seen on television. He describes himself as the 'deer' who is hunted and people like JC as the 'hyenas' who hunt them. However, this portrayal of the wider networks remained the most challenging aspect of organised crime to implement in the resources. One practitioner who commented on an edit of the film asked 'What about the lions above the hyenas?' again illustrating the difficulty in showing the levels and layers when the young person is unlikely to have direct contact with more than one level up in the hierarchy.

This was less challenging to portray in the introductory film for practitioners (What is serious and organised crime?). Given the target audience, it could offer more generalised information on the forms of organised crime, how young people might become engaged and how this fits into the wider context. For example, whilst the youth worker and youth offending worker within the film discuss how young people might become involved, the police representative explains the forms of crime, the typical hierarchy and the local, national and international context of organised crime.

Within the evaluation stage of the project, practitioners praised the toolkit for not focusing on a BAME young person within the film. They recognised the difficulties

in portraying the different levels of organised crime and suggested additional films focusing on other characters in the narrative could combat this.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined three myths about young people and organised crime that practitioners and young people involved in the research for the educational resources project were keen to challenge. These myths emerged during the consultation stage of the project, particularly in the challenging of them by practitioners, and are as follows:

1. That there is a clear choice or dilemma experienced by young people before they engage with organised crime;
2. That young people who engage with crime do so out of a sense of entitlement;
3. That there is such thing as a typical offender when it comes to crime and, particularly, organised crime.

The evaluation of the toolkit that was developed suggests it was largely successful in avoiding reinforcing these myths. 81% of practitioners who responded to the large-scale survey stating that they would definitely use the film 'Consequences' with young people. This is significant given that during the consultation stage, practitioners were overwhelmingly wary of myths and assumptions being reproduced by the toolkit. Additionally, 95% of respondents rated the toolkit as 'very useful' or 'quite useful' overall and 95% also said they would recommend the toolkit to a colleague. Readers of this paper may want to decide for themselves by accessing the Serious and Organised Crime Toolkit at www.infed.org/mobi/soctoolkit.

The film 'What is serious and organised crime?' is aimed at practitioners and offers an introduction to serious and organised crime, and how young people may become involved. The film 'Consequences' is designed to be used with young people as an interactive resource. It is recommended that it is watched in three parts with group discussion in between. The workbook contains session plans and discussion prompts for use with 'Consequences' as well as further information on serious and organised crime.

This paper has suggested that myths are avoided, even challenged, by the toolkit. In particular, it challenges the 'culture of entitlement' and 'prevention as enforcement' discourses which are also criticised in the academic literature. Portraying the range of people involved in organised crime was a more significant challenge, particularly in 'Consequences' which needed to be personalised rather than abstract in order to be engaging and relevant to young people. The portrayal of the range of people and activities included in organised crime would be enhanced by adding to the toolkit other films that cover different characters, forms of organised crime and ways in which young people are vulnerable to involvement.

The level of collaboration with young people and practitioners through the research for the project enabled these myths and assumptions, among others, to be unearthed and avoided in the toolkit. As such, the key argument of this paper is for the importance of collaborating with young people and practitioners in the development of resources for them. This is supported by Case (2006) who argues that the qualitative accounts of young people should be sought in defining the risk factors for their engagement with crime. Such collaborative processes should also be used to inform policies and practices more widely to ensure that outputs and interventions are relevant, authentic and not misleading.

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