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**Building youth resilience:  
From policy to practice,  
and the impact of  
professionalism**

The area of youth risk and resilience has been a topic of increasing attention, especially concern re anti-social behaviour → Investment in programmes and research into risk and the development of resilience, most often with the aim of reducing youth crime.

However, policies & programmes reflect social values rather than issues of risk and resilience per se → outcomes used to assess risk and resilience in one context may not transfer to another context.

Problems (as ‘resilience’ is often defined as ‘doing well despite ‘risk’’):

- Decontextualised criteria for normality.
- Primacy of *risk* has replaced *need* as the key driver of policy and intervention.

This presentation discusses these issues, and how policy translates into practice, with particular attention to the unintended consequences of policy decisions based on moral panics and inadequate definitions of risk and resilience.

# *Some of the issues*

- What is risk?
- What is resilience?
- What is recovery?

- In New Zealand millions of dollars are invested in programmes and research into risk and the development of resilience (MYD, MSD, FRST, HRC, Families Commission...)
- Resilience-building is also a part of the national secondary school curriculum, for example, with Level 8 health classes, including activities aimed at identifying an area in which there is a need to develop the resilience of a group of students and taking action to meet this need

- Substantial and continuing research on risk and its association with anti-social and criminal behaviour.
- Do concerns about youth risk reflect competing social values and anxieties rather than issues of risk and resilience per se?

# Resilience or conformity?

- studies of resilience and risk have tended to be value-laden both in terms of how adversity is defined and how resilience is measured
- resilience equals conformity and risk (and anti-social behaviour) equals nonconformity
- do concerns about youth risk and crime reflect personal anxieties, competing social values and public policy rather than issues of risk and resilience per se?
- Is the current plethora of policy initiatives focused on 'at risk' youth the corollary of a moral panic about out of control children?



- “The emphasis on risk management has overtaken therapeutic thinking” Senior NZ Ministry policy adviser
- “A leaked dossier has revealed that a justice system which swallows unprecedented sums of money is failing to catch or properly punish millions of criminals. The Government audit shows that Labour’s criminal justice spending is the highest in Europe at £18.2billion a year. But the dossier ... reveals that there were 4.7million crimes last year but only 1,376,994 offenders were ‘brought to justice’. That means 3.3million crimes went unsolved... fewer than 40 per cent of the public think the system is working.”  
*Labour throws £18bn at failed war on crime, 5 Apr 2010, Daily Mail, p.10.*



- The unproblematic presentation of youths as being ‘at risk’, often with no discussion of what is meant by this term, suggests the depth with which the concept is embedded within value and belief systems – so deeply embedded that no explanation is considered necessary (Armstrong, 2004). Yet risk is indefinable without recourse to belief systems and moral codes (Lupton, 1999).
- Further, though the literature on resilience has identified a range of factors that correlate with healthy functioning in the face of adversity, its predictive power is low.



- Are these people ‘at risk’?
- Are they showing signs of resilience?
- Why?
- How do you know?

- 16 years old
- Her boyfriend is in a gang
- She has been in trouble for fighting and theft, as have her friends
- She's pregnant and looking forward to meeting her baby
- Her mother (a solo mum), has said Juliana can continue to live at home and is secretly looking forward to being a grandmother

- James is also 16
- has done well at school academically, though frequent fights
- alcoholic father
- abusive home-life
- has left school to take a job stacking shelves in a supermarket

- Is doing very well at school, though very quiet
- Suffers depression and suicidal thoughts
- Copes by self-harming
- Considers that this is less harmful than the binge-drinking and recreational drug use of many of her peers.

- Behaviour deemed to denote risk is often more visible in poor communities, but there are multiple constructions of why this is, such as:
  - deliberate political focus/victim-blaming;
  - moral panic/media construction;
  - response/symptom of economic decline;
  - weakening of informal social control, replaced by punitive formal measures;
  - Increasing social exclusion of marginalised groups;
  - Disadvantaged neighbourhoods → incr (sense of) powerlessness exacerbated by marginalisation, generalised distrust → social disorganisation;
  - Punitiveness linked to socio-economic security (Burney, 2005; Coleman & Hagell, 2007)

# *What does this fluidity/flexibility mean for policies and services?*

- Outcome measurement, often deficit-based (despite strengths-based rhetoric)
- Funding vs ‘fudging’
- Professionalisation of youth work
- A tale of two ministries...
- And of two agencies

- “The importing of business models into the youth sector has led to short-term, target-driven projects and a huge increase in reporting. More than half our time is spent in admin, meaning our costs have doubled and time spent doing the ‘real’ work has halved and we can’t do anything that won’t have clearly measurable outcomes. This has also led to high staff turnover and we have about a third of the funding that we had a year ago”
- “We’ve been fighting for funding to do RCTs of various outcome measures...so we can have youth workers complete inventories with all the kids they see as pre- and post-tests. There were some ethical obstacles to get around, but it looks like we’re going to have [approx £1,000,000].”

# *Quotes from youth service providers*

“One of the projects we’re funded for is to work with underage sex workers. There’ve been quite a few times when we’ve been making real progress with a girl, to get off drugs or whatever that’s keeping her on the streets but she has her 18th birthday and suddenly we’re meant to stop working with her. Of course you can’t, so that’s work we do that isn’t funded. A lot of our outcome reports are ‘fudged’ so that we can afford to do the work that we need to do.”





- New policy: ‘Fresh Start’, boot camps and ‘parental education’
- Conceptualisations vary markedly, e.g.
  - Rhetoric for a ‘short, sharp shock’ vs. concern re agency of individuals and youth potential
  - Parents as drivers of crime vs. concern that forced parental education does not work and builds resentment
- Arguably driven by ‘tick-boxes’ that meet political ideology/constituent demands rather than evidence base.
- Or (less cynically 😊) that it is appropriate for services to be able to provide evidence of outcomes in order to secure further funding
- Ignores the potential adaptive functions of ‘risky’ behaviour

# *Funding based on meeting outcome targets I: 'Risk' & 'Resilience'*

- Belief systems and moral codes are implicit and inherent in definitions, e.g. 'Richelle' (pregnant teen), 'James' (early school leaver)
- However when we consider the context it may be revealed that his decisions are in fact aimed at creating a better life, by removing himself from an abusive family situation and a school at which he was bullied.

# *Criminal justice interventions:*

- Individualise – no mechanism to address collective & accumulating harm in a community, but ASB undermines social capital and community cohesion
- Crime prevention prioritised over poverty prevention
- Increased onus on parents
- Crime and disorder re-conceptualised as ASB → context overlooked and rise in exclusion, intolerance and excuses for inequality; behaviour seen as typical of ‘that kind of person’
- Increasingly punitive society

- Focus on criminal justice, not social justice
- Crime prevention, not poverty prevention
- ‘Responsibilisation strategies’
- Increased social exclusion
- Law and order increasingly a key political platform
- Focus on ASB serves several purposes:
  - Allows construction of ‘other’ to exclude → perception of social inclusion as a result
  - Being seen to address community concern
  - Shift focus from underlying issues
  - Solutions: \$ penalties, public humiliation, intolerance of difference
- (Burney, 2005; Coleman & Hagell, 2007)

- There is little literature that deals explicitly with the effects of powerlessness in young people's lives.
- It would appear that the impact (and intent?) of interventions for 'at risk' youth is to constrain them and limit their choices/power.
- The literature is preoccupied with 'chaotic' families and communities (Chichetti, Toth & Rogosch, 2000; Wyman, Sandler, Wolchik & Nelson, 2000) → implication that control is lacking, calls for 'boot camps' and harsher penalties for youth offenders.
- When powerlessness is discussed, it is in terms of individual psychological states such as reduced coping, self-esteem, anxiety and depression, with the corollary that the onus is on the individual to overcome these states; the socio-political realities that underpin existence are ignored.

# *Funding based on meeting outcome targets II*

- Who gets targeted?
  - Those most likely to result in ‘outcomes’
- How are outcomes measured?
- Detailed assessment and auditing
- ‘Transparency’ - an invisible cost

- Though we hear a lot about youth resilience from policy-makers & funding providers, decreasing risk is the real goal
- Poorly defined but often risk to others, rather than young people
- Minimal attention to need
- Political motivations
- Restrictive service delivery