

reason they applied to become a youth court magistrate in the first place. For my day job I am Director of a large Foyer project called Focus E15 in the London Borough of Newham, which is also in East London. Focus E15 is a Non Governmental Organisation providing accommodation linked to training for 210 young people aged between 16 and 24 in serious housing need. We also run a Community Radio Project, a Cyber Cafe, a Lifeskills Training Programme and a Youth Information & Advice Centre.

Youth courts in England and Wales are responsible for hearing cases brought against youths of 10 to 17 years of age [once the age of 18 is attained young people move to the adult Magistrates Courts]. Virtually all prosecutions against youths are assigned to the youth court, including allegations relating to serious offences which in the case of an adult would progress to the higher Crown Court. Youth courts have an additional responsibility to look beyond the offending and also consider the longer term development of the individual concerned. A concept often referred to as welfare versus 'just deserts'. This balancing exercise represents one of the foremost challenges for decision-makers in the youth court. 95% of cases are determined in the youth courts, with only the most serious 5% being transferred to the higher Crown Courts. The Thames Youth Court, where I sit, handles 3% of youth court work in England and Wales and in 1997 we heard 2,935 cases involving 1,878 defendants. The number of court cases is currently rising by about 3% annually.

A major research study was prepared for the Home Office [UK Government] in 1995 entitled 'Young People and Crime'. This was a study of self-reported offending among 14 to 25 year olds - and thereby included offences which were not detected as well as those which were. It provides some valuable insights into youth crime in the UK.

- \* Over half the males and about one-third of the females admit that they have committed an offence at

some time, but most have committed no more than one or two minor offences.

- \* Males are two and a half times more likely than females to have committed an offence in the previous 12 months. The proportion of male to female offenders increases with the seriousness of the offence.
- \* About 3% of offenders account for approximately a quarter of all offences.
- \* White and Afro-Caribbean young people have similar rates of offending, while Asians have significantly lower rates.
- \* The peak age of offending is 21 for males and 16 for females (compared with 18 and 15 respectively for detected offences).
- \* Overall the frequency of offending and the seriousness of offending declines with age.
- \* Factors associated with an increased likelihood of offending include low parental supervision, a poor relationship with at least one parent, truancy, poor achievement at school, having delinquent friends or family members, the use of drugs and the heavy use of alcohol.

From my own experience there are two points I should like to highlight from this study. For the past fifteen years Tower Hamlets has experienced a rapid rise in the Bangladeshi [Asian] population who now account for 52% of the local school population. It is true that until recently they exhibited lower levels of offending than the white community, but this is no longer the case. They now account for at least half of all the cases appearing before the youth court, in direct proportion to their numbers in the community. The second point is that in the overwhelming number of cases [I should guess as high as 98%] there will exist one or more of the factors associated with an increased likelihood of offending which were identified in the study. Indeed it is hard for me to remember the last time I heard a case where there were not difficulties with relationships at home