

Institution: University of Northumbria at Newcastle		
Unit of Assessment: 20 (Social Work and Social Policy)		
Title of case study: Reducing reoffending rates by young offenders through employment: Enhancing the work of the Skill Mill		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Sarah Soppitt	Professor	05/09/2005 - present
Mike Long	Associate Professor	01/08/2014 -17/08/2017
Paul Stretesky	Professor	01/05/2014 - present
Mike Rowe	Professor	01/12/2009 - present
Adele Irving	Senior Lecturer	21/11/2005 - present
Sara Lilley	Research Assistant/ Researcher	28/05/2001 - 31/01/2016
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>The challenges for ex-offenders in finding employment are well known and hard to overcome, despite employment being one of the strongest predictors of reduced reoffending. Northumbria University's research into programmes to support offenders, particularly the social exclusion of young offenders, identified key factors in improving their success, such as individualised rehabilitation programmes and sustained engagement through mentors. This research provided the blueprint for the practices of an independent not-for-profit social enterprise called The Skill Mill, in Newcastle upon Tyne from October 2013. The Skill Mill has provided direct support for 158 vulnerable young people aged 16-18 (around a third of those eligible) with poor educational outcomes, experiencing unemployment or under-employment, and who have several previous criminal justice interventions. In partnership with private and public organisations, The Skill Mill creates opportunities for education and job training in outdoor work. Engagement by this cohort with The Skill Mill has served to reduce re-conviction rates from 72% down to 9.5%, with 75% of participants going on to find employment, education, or training opportunities. The success of the Skill Mill has led to it being rolled out across England to a further seven sites and expanded internationally to Estonia, Holland, Serbia, and the USA.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The national reoffending rate for young people is 42%. The reoffending rate for those released from prison or young offender institutions is even higher at 68%. The prevailing system of early interventions but without sustained support for these vulnerable young people is failing to deliver long term rehabilitation and contributing to high reoffending. The personal vulnerability of young offenders is often exacerbated by their social exclusion and stigma, and the absence of mid- to long-term support mechanisms which promote sustainable employability. Employment can significantly reduce reoffending rates over the longer term. Changes in probation and the supervision of offenders – including under the Ministry of Justices' 2013 Transforming Rehabilitation strategy – has meant that traditional rehabilitation and reintegration approaches have relied on short-term and impersonal, rather than trust-based and person-centred, support [R1].</p> <p>In 2010, Newcastle Youth Offending Team (YOT) commissioned Northumbria University's Department of Social Sciences to undertake a critical evaluation of the delivery and impact of Triage - an established early diversion intervention for first-time entrants into the criminal justice system [R2]. This evaluation, conducted by Professor Sarah Soppitt and Dr Adele Irving, found that though the Triage method showed promise in promoting desistance, there were clear</p>		

shortfalls with regards to relationship-building, which undermined young offenders' understanding of the process, stymied engagement, and resulted in resistance to follow-up and restorative justice activities [R2].

Expanding these findings, subsequent research from Soppitt and colleagues at Northumbria (including Dr Mike Long, Professor Paul Stretesky, and Professor Mike Rowe) challenged the prevailing system and has shown that, without reform of the institutional support on offer, young offenders can become entrenched as a further marginalised group within a group which already faces significant obstacles to social and economic mobility. This in turn means that, because of their previous criminal offences, even precarious work such as zero hours' contracts can be inaccessible thereby creating what Soppitt described as a *sub-precariat* [R3, R6]. Soppitt, Long, and Stretesky argue that this sub-precariat constitutes a new subset within the systemic experience of precarity. These young people face an additional barrier to escaping the cycle of short-term, unstable employment because of their criminal background. This sub-precariat of young offenders is thus permanently excluded from the stability offered by secure employment and financial solvency support that provide resilience against reoffending [R3, R4].

Building on her research on the limitations of the adult probationary service and the obstacles faced by young people when they transition to adult criminal justice agencies [R1, R4], Soppitt and colleagues explored similar issues in youth justice initiatives [R5]. This research included working with educational initiatives and agencies - who aim to tackle novel psychoactive substance misuse among young people - in order to develop more effective intervention methods and develop enhanced ongoing support. This latter research identified that many young people who had been involved with the criminal justice system faced persistent and overwhelming barriers in accessing the labour market. Many had complex needs and chaotic lifestyles that required a more tailored approach to supporting their integration [R5].

Soppitt and the team's research argued that trust and personal relationships are central in supporting desistance [R4]. Even where support services were informed and engaged, and the young offenders motivated to reform, greater capacity to support individuals and the development of stable relationships with a bank of trusted employers were necessary to overcome the obstacles to employment [R6]. In this way, the research established that the character, culture, and ethos of the programmes developed by public, private, and third-sector organisations can provide these trusting relationships so pivotal to promoting motivation and maintaining engagement in desistance [R2]. Soppitt and team proposed a model under which a revised and expanded supervisor role offers more personalised and sustained mentorship to support young people to address their complex and chaotic lifestyles [R4]. This model - carried out through The Skill Mill - allows for a more bespoke, individualised programme of rehabilitation not offered by the current institutional framework.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Michael Rowe, Adele Irving, and Sarah Soppitt (2018) The legitimacy of offender management programmes in a post-TR landscape. *Safer Communities* 17(2): 69-80
<https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-07-2017-0028>

R2. Adele Irving and Sarah Soppitt (2014) 'Triage: line or nets? Early intervention and the youth justice system'. *Safer Communities* 13(4): 147-160 <https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-08-2014-0013>

R3. Michael Long, Oswald, R.*, Paul Stretesky, and Sarah Soppitt (2019) Do Flood Mitigation and Natural Habitat Protection Employment Reduce Youth Offending? *European Journal on Criminal Policy & Research* 25: 135-151 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-017-9365-y>

*PhD Student at time research was conducted

R4. Michael Rowe and Sarah Soppitt (2014) 'Who you gonna call?' The role of trust and relationships in desistance from crime. *Probation Journal* **61**(4): 397-412
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550514548252>

R5. Sarah Soppitt, Michael Rowe, Adele Irving, and Sara Lilley (2015) Evaluation of the Positive Pathways Programme for Northumbria Community Rehabilitation Company - report for Northumbria Community Rehabilitation Company <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/41074142.pdf>

R6. Sarah Soppitt, Adele Irving, Michael Rowe, and Sara Lilley (2015) Scoping the development of a critical Employment Pathway for IOM offenders in Durham and Darlington - report for the *Institute of Local Governance and Durham Police*
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/24936/1/Employment%20Pathways%20report%2010.11.15%20PDF.pdf>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The findings' from Soppitt's work were embedded in the programme of an independent not-for-profit social enterprise called The Skill Mill, set up by former members of the Newcastle YOT, using Soppitt's research findings to create mentorship roles providing bespoke support and partnerships with local organisations to create new employment opportunities. The first Skill Mill was established in October 2013 and began trading in February 2014, with operations guided by the research of Soppitt et al. [E1]. David Parks, Founding Director of The Skill Mill, explains: '*It was vital that Skill Mill worked with young offenders in a way that overcame these enduring obstacles to further education and sustainable employment*' [E1]. Parks praised the research conducted by the Northumbria team, saying that it '*offered a clear remedy that we used to shape the governing policy and operational practices of Skill Mill*' [E1]. The Skill Mill programme has now spread across the UK and into Estonia, Serbia, the Netherlands, and USA.

4.1 Establishment of The Skill Mill's work with young people

The Skill Mill works with 16-18-year-olds with poor educational outcomes, experiencing unemployment or under-employment, and who have several previous criminal justice interventions. This group represent the sub-preariat Soppitt identified in her research as being most in need of sustained support to find employment and complete the process of rehabilitation and avoid reoffending. For example, this included 88 people under the Newcastle YOT's jurisdiction between 2014-2019. Some young offenders were not eligible for the Skill Mill programme due to custodial sentences being imposed or because of the sensitive nature of their offences. However, many of those eligible have taken part in The Skill Mill - 158 participants to date [E2, p3]. In partnership with private and public organisations, including the Environment Agency, Northumbrian Water Ltd, and Newcastle City Council, The Skill Mill provides opportunities for education and job training in outdoor work, primarily in the areas of watercourse management and horticulture. The work provides physical activity, in nature, contributing to conservation and ecology, all of which bring benefits to participants [E2, p1-5].

Typically, this sort of work programme has a mentor to offender ratio of 1:15 or 1:20, however, the Skill Mill adopted a '*more holistic mentorship role*', of three to four offenders to one mentor, as advocated by Soppitt et al.'s research. The intensive nature of this mentor-mentee relationships has proved vital to the continued engagement of the young offenders in the educational and employment opportunities offered by the Skill Mill. Parks states this mentorship role has '*helped establish the Skill Mill's strong links with trusted employers, integrated our participants into a supportive community, and offered guidance and consistency with their multiple and complex needs ...and it has been instrumental in accomplishing the successes in sustained employment and increased desistance that our participants have achieved*' [E1].

4.2 Beneficial effects of The Skill Mill on young people's lives

The volume and frequency of reoffending was significantly lower among The Skill Mill participants than a control group with similar lifestyle challenges, offending histories, and psychological support needs [E3]. Specifically, involvement in The Skill Mill reduced the number

of offences by an average of 1.12 over each three-month period, compared to ex-offenders in the control group (mean offences 0.82). In the six years that The Skill Mill has been operating, it has employed 158 young people in the UK, of whom only 15 have been re-convicted. This means their re-conviction rate is just 9.5%, compared to a counter-factual of 72% for young offenders with 11+ convictions. In addition, 75% of the young people that The Skill Mill has employed have progressed to further employment, education, or training [E2, p3].

Barry Coppinger, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland, described the impact of The Skill Mill on young offenders as *'invaluable in preventing the cycle of offending behaviour'* because they *'give young people mentoring and qualifications'* [E2, p5]. Young people at The Skill Mill complete six-months of paid work at roughly 30 hours per week and most also gain a nationally recognised qualification during their time on the programme [E2, p2-3]. Those completing the programme have celebrated the benefits they have gained, saying, for example, that The Skill Mill *'gave me that massive chance to prove I'm not a criminal and I can work, I'm willing to work, and get up every morning and to do stuff for the environment'* [E2, p5]. An important part of The Skill Mill experience is that young ex-offenders are able to develop a sense of civic duty that helps them become connected to their communities. They can take pride in the work they do and the positive impact it has [E3, p14].

4.3 Changing youth offending practice across the UK: The Skill Mill approach

The expanded supervisor/mentor relationship adopted by The Skill Mill from Soppitt's research is crucial and that this programme can mark a critical turning point for young people [E3, p2]. In 2016, Her Majesty's Inspection of Probation carried out a Full Joint Inspection of Probation of Youth Offending work in Newcastle [E4] specifically noting the relationship with Northumbria University, *'which allowed for a rigorous and quick response to local issues'* [E4, p24]. The Skill Mill was noted as a good example of moving young people to employment [E4, p30]. In April 2018, the Local Government Association produced a Youth Justice Resource pack, designed to share good practice with a national audience. When highlighting the work of The Skill Mill the pack's authors noted, *'The supervisor role within the Skill Mill is key, providing both a managerial and mentoring role to the young people involved in placements'* [E5, p27]. Andy Peaden, the Chair of the Association of YOT Managers - a body that represents over 80% of YOTs in England – confirms the importance of Soppitt's insights: *'The research of Soppitt and colleagues which underpins the Skill Mill activities, has been indispensable ...Not only have we experienced high levels of engagement both by the young people themselves and by local partner agencies but, as a result, we are witnessing substantial reductions in local re-offending rates'* [E6].

The success demonstrated by the evaluation of The Skill Mill cohorts [E3] led to the development of further Skill Mill sites with a resulting shift in engagement with young offenders in Leeds (2015), Durham (2017), and North Yorkshire (2017) [E2, p1]. In 2018, the UK government committed to supporting The Skill Mill in ten locations, with commentators noting that this will *'accrue significant savings through the beneficiaries' life course as they transition out of the criminal justice system and lead productive adult lives'* [E7]. Five new sites were added in 2020, in Croydon, Birmingham, Nottingham, Rochdale/Bury, and Surrey [E2, p1]. The Skill Mill's successes in multiple cities and with multiple cohorts of young people has been recognised and recommended as an example of best practice by local and national government. Lord Taylor, shortly before becoming Chair of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales in March 2017, carried out a review of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales in 2016 on behalf of the Ministry of Justice [E8]. In this report, Lord Taylor discusses the evolution of youth justice in the community and highlights The Skill Mill as one of a *'number of innovative models for delivering youth offending services which seek to strengthen [multi-disciplinary links]'* [E8, p7].

The Skill Mill has also been recognised for its contribution to tackling youth offending through being shortlisted for and winning numerous awards, including commendation from the Howard League Community Awards Restorative Justice Award 2017. It also won the Constructing Excellence Award 2016 and the Children and Young People Now Youth Justice Award, in both 2014 and 2019 [E2, p6].

4.4 Impacts on youth offending practice in Estonia, Serbia, the Netherlands, USA

In 2016, The Skill Mill expanded to Tallinn, Estonia with support from the National Civil Society Fund, an organisation which supports non-governmental organisations through Estonian Ministry of Interior financing [E3, p16; E9, p2, p4]. Further Skill Mills are also being launched through similar partnerships in the Netherlands and Serbia, with the prospective Serbian Skill Mill site confirmed as the town of Kruševac in May 2020 and the Netherlands site soon to be announced (delayed by COVID-19) [E2, p9-10]. In the USA, the National Partnership for Juvenile Services (NPJS) – which supports professional development across the USA and promotes best practices and standards in the field of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention – is also adopting The Skill Mill model [E10]. The Skill Mill has been represented at its National Symposiums for the past five years and has directly informed its training and operational practices. As Managing Director, Michael A. Jones, explains:

'This research has played a vital role in shaping some of the training we offer at the NPJS ... which includes discussions around the importance of vocational skill development and the use of mentoring in improving youth engagement' and 'The work of Skill Mill ... is helping to shape practice procedures amongst other juvenile services in the United States and encourage them to adopt similar positive youth development approaches' [E10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Testimonial from David Parks, Founding Director of The Skill Mill	Link from research to the creation of Skill Mill
E2	Skill Mill website compilation: testimonials page, About Us, UK offices map, Estonia, Netherlands, and Serbia pages, and awards	Growth, achievements, and endorsement of Skill Mill
E3	The Skill Mill Evaluation (co-authored by Soppitt, verified by Newcastle City Council)	Impact on young offenders
E4	Full Joint Inspection of Probation of Youth Offending work in Newcastle	Impact on probationary service, link to research
E5	Local Government Association – Youth Justice Resource Pack	Skill Mill as good practice example
E6	Testimonial from Andy Peaden, Chair of the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers	Impacts on professional practice
E7	Social Enterprise UK article	Account of funding for and benefits of Skill Mill
E8	Lord Taylor review of youth justice in the community, England	Skill Mill as good practice
E9	The National Civil Society Fund (Estonia) webpage and a news report about the creation of The Skill Mill in Estonia	Estonian partner organisations and government support for The Skill Mill
E10	Testimonial from Michael Jones, Managing Director of NJPS	Influence on youth justice practice in USA