



AIM

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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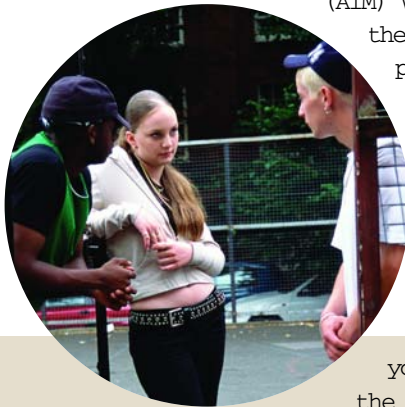
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A summary of the evaluation of the AIM framework for the assessment of adolescents who display sexually harmful behaviour

BACKGROUND

The Assessment, Intervention and Moving-on Project (AIM) was set up in January 2000 to improve the way professionals respond to young people aged 10 to 17 years who display sexually harmful behaviour. The need for such an initiative was recognised as a result of a Greater Manchester study conducted by the Youth Justice Trust in 1998.



The study found that there were major shortcomings in the way these young people were assessed. As a result, the AIM assessment procedure (Print, Morrison and Henniker, 2000) was introduced as a key part of the AIM Project. The Youth Justice Board commissioned the Youth Justice Trust to carry out a two-year evaluation of the procedure, on which this summary is based.

Some young people who sexually harm come to notice via the Criminal Justice System or child protection

the study found that there were major shortcomings in the way that these young people were assessed

services. There are also other less formalised routes - for instance, displaying inappropriate behaviour at school, or identification by a GP.

THE AIM FRAMEWORK

The purpose of the AIM framework is to provide guidelines for practitioners from a wide range of agencies (Yots, police, social services, education, health) in order to give them a common language and a shared approach to tackling sexually harmful behaviour.

The AIM assessment framework relies on the consent of those assessed. It considers offence-specific and developmental factors, the role played by ~~parents/carers, and the community/environment~~ dynamics affecting the young person in question.

The framework consists of 10 steps (set out below) to assist and encourage practitioners in gathering and analysing information on the risks posed by the young person, as well as on their needs. The lead agency should:

- 1. identify the assessors, the consultant and dates for the completion of the report, and subsequent multi-disciplinary meeting for discussion**
- 2. observe the memorandum interview or read the victim statement**
- 3. listen to the PACE (Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984) interview or any account given by the young person regarding their behaviour**
- 4. read files and collate any information held by other professionals**
- 5. use the AIM Project assessment model to identify what is known and not known**
- 6. plan the interview with the young person and the parents/carers, aiming to fill in the missing information, and to prepare them for**

the assessment process

7. interview the young person
8. interview the parents/carers
9. draw conclusions about the young person's risk, needs, capacity to change, and the degree of support parents/carers can provide
10. take the completed report to the multi-disciplinary meeting hosted by the social services Child Protection Unit.



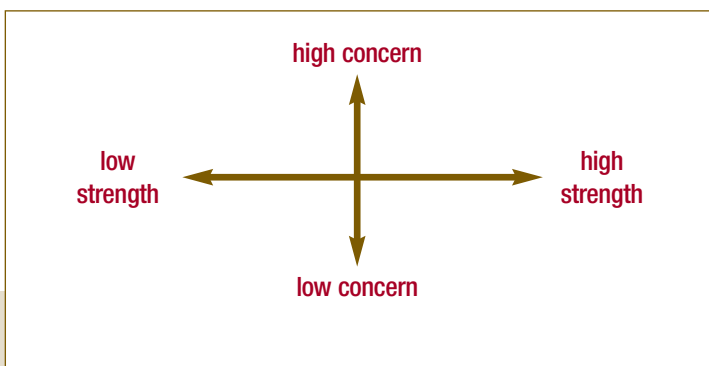
The AIM framework involves co-ordinated working between agencies, and the gathering of information from various organisations. The AIM multi-agency meeting is hosted by the Child Protection Unit in each local authority area. The meeting should agree roles, tasks and allocation of resources. It should also involve parents/carers and the young person, providing them with clear information and an action plan.

'Strengths' and 'concerns' aspects of the AIM assessment

Assessment protocols often overlook the positive characteristics of an individual and his or her situation. AIM, by contrast, takes these into account, referring to them as 'strengths'. The positive characteristics of individuals and their families may be important protective factors in reducing the risk of reoffending and, therefore, need to be assessed. They are as important in evaluating the outcomes for a young person

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AIM takes these into account

The assessment incorporates a scoring system for practitioners. The number of factors applicable to the young person and their environment is calculated based on high- and low-concern factors, and high and low 'strengths'. A score is only provided for those factors which apply and, once the continuums of 'strengths' and 'concerns' have been scored, the young person's characteristics are plotted on an outcome matrix (see Figure 1 below). The result helps to inform treatment and sanctions.



THE RESEARCH

- assess the effectiveness of the AIM framework's multi-agency approach
- consider the usefulness of AIM as a screening tool to assist practitioners
- evaluate the level of accuracy of the 'strengths' and 'concerns' continuums, and the outcome matrix
- identify how the 10-step framework is used in practice
- look at the impact of the AIM assessment on young people and their parents/carers.

- **an evaluation and monitoring form recording basic organisational, personal, incident and environment details, and assessment information for every young person who undergoes an AIM assessment**
- **a form recording how the continuum of indicators is used in practice, and illustrating whether professional judgement agrees with the outcome**
- **observations of assessments (the evaluator sat in on assessments undertaken by co-workers)**
- **psychological testing of the young people**
- **a questionnaire gauging practitioners' experience of the AIM framework**
- **case studies to gauge the degree of agreement between professionals using the AIM assessment**
- **an exit questionnaire, to be administered by the researcher on a sample of young people and their parents/carers to gauge their experience of the AIM assessment process**
- **AIM Project Co-ordinator interviews**
- **interviews on AIM with a variety of professionals from agencies including child protection, education, police, courts and any other relevant agencies**
- **telephone interviews with practitioners outside Greater Manchester from Yots, social services and/or voluntary organisations on their current protocols and practice for working with young people displaying sexually harmful behaviour.**

The 'strengths' element of the AIM assessment was validated using the Behavioural and Emotional Rating



Scale (BERS) and the Family Assessment Measure version III (FAM III). The 'concerns' element was validated using a rating scale based on ASAP, a psychometric assessment procedure.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

Evaluating every assessment undertaken in Greater Manchester was complex because AIM was being used by many agencies, and specific workers had not been assigned to the task. Staff turnover and staff shortages created additional difficulties in this respect.

Because practitioners in local authority teams were usually already overburdened with paperwork, securing their participation was difficult. In addition, some also felt that the time demands the evaluation made on the young people were unacceptable.

It was also difficult to persuade parents/carers to take part in the evaluation. In a couple of cases, they initially agreed to participate, but refused to continue when it became clear that no financial compensation was available. The invitation to participate was also turned down because parents/carers had simply had enough of the whole process.

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Gaining access to young people to conduct the exit questionnaires was also difficult, because the evaluator was not necessarily aware that the AIM assessment had taken place until practitioner contact with the young person had ceased. Furthermore, at this stage of the assessment process, young people were often distressed so interviewing would have been unethical.

In addition, the sample for testing 'strengths' was distorted because it was



- **76% of assessments adhered to all 10 steps of the AIM assessment framework.**
- **Recommendations made as a result of AIM assessments were either carried out in full, or were in the process of being implemented, in 61 of 71 cases. In the 10 cases where recommendations were not carried out, this was because the young people had been placed in prison, or their legal status had changed.**
- **The fact that the AIM assessment takes into account the social, environmental and cultural contexts in which the young people live, as well as the 'strengths' within that environment, was seen by practitioners as one of its main advantages.**
- **Multi-disciplinary meetings were mostly seen as providing a structured way of dealing with these young people, helping to share responsibility and make a case for extra resources. They also provided a central point for collating information about the size and scope of the problem within individual local authorities.**
- **Professionals, from a range of disciplines, with less direct experience of the AIM assessment tool, viewed the AIM assessment as a positive contribution to the area of adolescent sex-offending.**

- Overall, 75% of AIM assessments concurred with alternative ways of measuring 'strengths' (BERS and FAMIII scales), and 35% of assessments concurred with an alternative way of measuring 'concerns' (ASAP).
- A 12 to 18-month follow-up of 27 young people assessed by AIM identified one young person who reoffended with a sexual offence. This young person was assessed as 'high concern' and 'low strength'. The three young people who breached their orders following assessment were also considered 'high concern'. This outcome reflects well on the accuracy of the AIM assessment tool.
- In most cases, the AIM assessment outcome was consistent with the judgement of professionals.
- There was a lot of inconsistency between assessments made under the AIM framework as to the proposed outcomes for young people, and what actually happened to them. This was particularly true of young people assessed with 'low concerns' and 'high strengths' factors whom assessors recommended for Reprimand. In practice, they ended up being given Referral Orders, which were only introduced towards the very end of the evaluation.
- In 9% of AIM assessment outcomes monitored, practitioners disagreed with the outcome, in favour of medium 'strengths' and 'concerns', even though the AIM tool does not specify 'medium' as an option.
- In 35% of assessments, the outcome differed from ASAP scales because the AIM assessment does not provide a 'medium' outcome possibility. For these cases, the AIM assessment tended to overestimate risk and 'concerns'.



considered unethical for young people with low 'strengths' ratings to complete tests that, by the very nature of the questions, might leave them feeling vulnerable and dejected. As a result of the sample, the validity of this evaluation for young people with low 'strengths' is not as reliable as for those with high 'strengths'.

MAIN FINDINGS

The main findings of the research are summarised below.

CONCLUSIONS

The AIM assessment procedure has achieved its overall objectives. Most workers have been trained to use it, and inter-agency co-operation has increased through the establishment of the AIM assessment protocol. The AIM assessment framework meets with the requirements of the Youth Justice Board's Key Elements of Effective Practice.

the AIM assessment procedure has achieved its overall objectives

Qualitative reaction generally indicated that the assessment model was valuable in both guiding practitioners and boosting their confidence. In general, they felt that it was easy to use, practical and flexible. The process was also eased for practitioners by the fact that the AIM assessment was based on both Asset (the Youth Justice Board's assessment procedure for young people involved in the youth justice system) and an existing Department of Health assessment; this meant that it was already, to some extent, familiar to Yot and social services practitioners.



On the downside, the AIM model has been shown to be less useful for young people in temporary care or in dual environments (for instance, a young person may live part of the week with his or her mother and the rest with the father). In addition, the AIM model is not consistent - for example, there was some discrepancy between the scoring of characteristics that automatically make the young person high concern, regardless of other factors. Timescales for assessments were also sometimes thought to be difficult to work to.

In general, however, the AIM framework has considerably improved policy and practice in dealing with young people who display sexually harmful behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations the report makes are general, and apply to the success of any inter-agency work; some are specific to the AIM project. General recommendations include:

- **continued participation to maximise progress – for example, by establishing local consultants in 2004, working with areas and agencies to help them overcome problems, and ensuring regular information updates**
- **regular training to take account of staff turnover, as well as to develop the nature of the work**
- **support for practitioners, such as peer-group meetings where case studies can be discussed, as well as continuous line-management supervision**
- **regular review of problems within areas and agencies, and commitment to work across agencies to overcome barriers.**

Specific recommendations are as follows (Referral Orders were not in place during the development of the AIM assessment model).

- **There should be more detailed guidance on the quality and quantity expected for the concluding AIM assessment report.**
- **Efforts should be made to look at inconsistencies between the assessments made on young people with 'low concerns' and 'high strengths', and the outcomes for them within the Criminal Justice System, looking, in particular, at how and why Referral Orders are used.**
- **The AIM assessment should incorporate a differential marking system for when factors are not present or not known.**
- **Guidance should be given on how to complete the assessment for young people in dual or temporary environments.**
- **The AIM Project should consider providing outcomes of 'medium strength' and 'medium concern'. Practitioners have tended to use the 'medium' option when factors in the high and low scales of the continuums were evenly spread. However, the development of a 'medium' category within the assessment model and how it should be formulated is a task best left to the creators of the AIM assessment – perhaps in consultation with other experts in the field.**
- **Better guidance needs to be provided concerning outcomes and appropriate interventions, especially within the criminal justice context. Referral Orders need to be included in this guidance, as they were introduced after the launch of the AIM assessment framework.**

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The full report on which this summary is based is available on the Youth Justice Board website.

Further copies of this summary can be obtained from:
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