








The role of street-based youth work in linking socially excluded young people into education, training and work

This research represents the first, major, national study of street-based youth work in England and Wales. It focused in particular on work with socially excluded young people – a key target group for the Connexions service. The study investigated the geographical spread of street-based youth work, the young people it reached and its impact upon their lives. The study, undertaken by a team from the Universities of Lincoln, Luton and Durham, found:

-  Street-based youth work has grown significantly in recent years: this study identified 564 projects, which had contact with 65,325 young people.
-  Nevertheless, geographical coverage is very uneven.
-  There has been a significant shift away from longer-term, area-based, projects towards short-term work with particular high-risk groups or on particular issues.
-  As a result, in the majority of cases funding was short-term and this created problems with staff retention. Smaller projects were often at risk of folding because of this.
-  While working with a mix of young people, the projects studied were successfully reaching and working with large numbers of the most socially excluded young people.
-  These projects served as an important source of information on educational and career opportunities for such young people who were often out of contact with any other agencies. The projects also appeared to be successful in reintroducing young people to education, training and employment and supporting their entry to it.
-  In order to work successfully with the most excluded young people, workers believed that they had to adopt a flexible approach, based on voluntary involvement and responsiveness to the needs of individual young people. However, this was sometimes in tension with the expectations of some funders, who were concerned about single issues, the achievement of quick, quantifiable, results and the capacity of street-based intervention to control young people's behaviour.

Background

Reaching socially excluded young people who are out of education, training and work is central to the success of the Connexions strategy. This research asks how target-driven youth initiatives and time-limited funding affect street-based youth work; how it links with the Connexions service; and what policy developments would be needed to maximise its impact.

The distribution of street-based youth work

For the Connexions age group (13-19 years) provision ranged from one street-based youth project work per 3,000 young people in Devon and Cornwall to one per 55,000 in Northampton. Some counties in Wales had none. Although provision in urban areas tended to be concentrated in socially deprived neighbourhoods, the major cities were not particularly well served, with the largest concentration of projects being in small towns. Here, street work was sometimes developed in response to the paucity of building-based youth provision. Many projects were in rural areas where young people faced problems of social isolation not just social exclusion.

Who is reached?

Projects surveyed were reaching over 65,000 young people; if this pattern of contact held for all projects in England and Wales it would mean that street-based youth work was in touch with approximately 1.2 per cent of the Connexions age range. On average, 62 per cent of the young people in touch with projects were men, 38 per cent were women and 15 per cent were described as having an ethnic minority background. 81 per cent of these young people were in the Connexions age range.

The heavy representation of boys may be due to the fact that young men tend to use the streets more than young women and are often more vociferous in their demands, even though young women may have equally pressing needs. Moreover, the growing emphasis in policy and project funding upon 'youth nuisance' or youth crime creates a bias towards work with young men.

At their first point of contact with a street-work project, 30 per cent of young people were not in education, training or employment, 24 per cent were receiving no income or benefits, 45 per cent had a history of offending and 34 per cent were living in inadequate or temporary accommodation. Only 25 per cent were in touch with another youth project or welfare agency.

The major problem areas the young people faced were: lack of leisure facilities (60 per cent); alcohol, drugs and family relationships (40 per cent); education, training and crime (37 per cent); literacy, numeracy and sexual health (30 per cent); housing,

being victims of crime, mental and physical health (20 per cent); care and care-leaving, being a carer, prostitution, parenthood and immigration (5-10 per cent).

Some young people had serious problems. But those at high risk or with high needs would often associate with those with medium to low needs or levels of risk. Even projects aiming to intervene with high-risk/need young people tended to work with less problematic members of their client's network because these young people often constituted potentially powerful influence and support systems.

How effective is street-based youth work?

Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon: changes for young people over time cannot simply be attributed to the intervention of a street-based youth worker. However, contact with a street-based worker or project appeared to help young people in many areas of their lives. Of 76 randomly selected young people in touch with projects:

- Almost 29 per cent were unemployed or not in education or training when the research team first visited the project. This fell to 21 per cent at the second visit 3-6 months later.
- Those with no income and not in receipt of benefits fell from 24 per cent to 20 per cent between visits.
- Those deemed to be a core member of a group involved in 'anti-social' activity declined from 18 per cent to 4 per cent.
- Regular attendance and active participation in structured youth activities rose from 26 per cent to 37 per cent; the proportion banned from youth provision dropped from 3 per cent to 0.
- The numbers known to be offending diminished by almost a third, from 45 per cent to 31 per cent.
- The proportion in adequate accommodation rose from 62 per cent to 68 per cent and the numbers sleeping rough fell from 7 per cent to 1.5 per cent.
- The numbers of young people maintaining contact with statutory welfare agencies over the period increased from 4 per cent to 15 per cent.

Control and surveillance

As originally conceived, Connexions aimed to involve street-based youth workers in identifying, supporting, tracking, and sharing information about hard-to-reach young people who were out of education, employment or training. Some street-based youth workers were concerned about this, having previously worked on the basis that confidentiality between the young person and the worker or project was sacrosanct. Subsequent government guidance (*Transforming youth work*) and the White Paper on anti-social behaviour have identified the Youth Service and Connexions as key

members of Crime Reduction Partnerships, and appear to suggest a more directly controlling role for both.

Many workers were concerned about the effects their closer involvement with crime control and community safety initiatives were having on the ways they were perceived by the young people, the public, partner agencies and local politicians.

Many workers described tensions between the demands of effective practice with challenging young people and the expectation they would be able to stop or change problematic behaviour in the short term. While it appears that street-based youth work can, and does, contribute to the control of young people, such control is usually rooted in a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Building these relationships, particularly with high-need/-risk young people, can take a considerable time.

"It can take upwards to a year, realistically, because you're taking on someone who has a hopeless view of the future and really rudimentary social skills."
(Worker)

Target-driven, issue-based, interventions

Many workers were also concerned about the constraints placed upon effective practice by target-driven, single-issue funding. In almost all projects, intervention was based upon a negotiation of roles and goals between the young person and the worker. Most workers saw a need to begin with the issues that concerned the young person and to develop a longer-term relationship in order to be available to them when particular issues or problems arose.

"What working with young people in an outreach situation needs is sustained, long-term, work. You need time to engage the young people, get their trust and get to know them, what makes them tick and then to actually alter, or try and influence, their behaviour and activities, and you don't do that by jumping around from area to area."
(Worker)

Funding street-based youth work

Current funding regimes aim to achieve the closest fit between policy objectives and practice outcomes. While this has encouraged innovation, tightly targeted, time-limited funding has also destabilised some projects. At least half the projects surveyed were struggling to stay afloat financially.

"Initially the project was funded for three years. One of the objectives for year two was to have the next funders in place beyond the original funding deadline. It comes back to long-term needs and short-term funding." (Manager)

Competition for funds between complementary projects and between different regional branches of the same organisation appeared to be leading to significant gaps in provision. Paradoxically, some projects faced the opposite problem, with funders approaching them to bid for finance which had suddenly become available and had to be spent quickly. This was usually due to the available finance outstripping the capacity of the relevant funder to set up an appropriate bidding process in time.

Smaller voluntary sector projects and those run by local residents in response to local need are particularly vulnerable in this environment. As a result, policy goals and inter-agency strategies were sometimes disrupted by the threatened or actual collapse of a street-based youth project.

Staffing street-based youth work

Uncertainties about funding have led to high staff turnover. Smaller projects often tried to ensure cash-flow by avoiding long-term staffing commitments. Three-quarters of project workers in the survey were either volunteers or part-time, sessional staff. More experienced full-time workers were usually too busy with administration to go onto the streets.

"[Churning] out figures on a monthly basis ... really detracts from the actual work and stops practitioners being out there doing the work they're good at."
(Manager)

Staff turnover made it difficult to match the training, skills and experience of workers with the needs and risks presented by young people. Although sessional staff and volunteers usually had some form of induction, opportunities for continuing professional development were rare as project funding frequently covers only time spent in face-to-face work. Consequently, relatively inexperienced and untrained workers could find themselves working with high-need/-risk young people. Volunteers and sessional workers were often unable to pursue referrals to other agencies and were seldom able to accompany young people on initial visits (which may be crucial to the success of the referral).

Education, training and employment - working with Connexions

While welcoming the advent of Connexions as a potential resource, many street-based youth workers were apprehensive about its apparent rigidity, the narrowness of its focus and its perceived emphasis on achieving tightly demarcated outcomes. Many workers also remain unclear about what, precisely, Connexions is and what its existence will mean for them. Some workers feared a Connexions 'takeover', in which developmental youth work will be abandoned in favour of a bureaucratised practice.

"Connexions, by providing funding with strings, is creating a monopoly in services for young people. Where will they go for choice if voluntary organisations, as well as statutory organisations are all 'badged up'?" (Worker)

The research team encountered many instances of resistance, poor communication, and hostility, sometimes rooted in a history of conflict between a project and its local Careers Service. However, there were also examples of highly effective collaboration. In these cases, Connexions managers and Personal Advisers appeared to be pursuing the 'developmental' ethos of street-based youth work and adopting a flexible approach to assessing results.

The duration of intervention

Young people out of education, training and employment may need long-term support: this may go beyond the Connexions upper age limit (19 years). However, some of the proposals in *Transforming youth work* – which emphasise accredited participation and tightly specified targets and outcomes - might inadvertently steer street-based youth work away from long-term work with the most problematic young people.

"There is an issue around numbers, if you need to reach a certain number of clients, you may select the easier to work with young people. If funders truly want projects to work with the 'hard to reach' they need to set very low target numbers." (Worker)

Conclusion

It appears that Connexions and street-based project workers can work together effectively. However, it is also evident that, in the case of harder-to-reach or more challenging young people, street-work interventions will need to be medium- to long-term, open-ended and flexible. All parties will sometimes have to be prepared for a long wait before quantifiable results become evident. The researchers conclude that:

- The government needs to be far clearer about its expectations of Connexions workers and the degree of flexibility it is prepared to grant them and local partnerships if they are to link effectively with street-based work.
- The duration of a successful intervention may be dictated by the time it takes for the young person to gain sufficient confidence and maturity rather than an arbitrary chronological cut-off point set by funding or project goals.

- There is a tension between this sometimes tortuous process and the potentially more coercive and confrontational 'fire-fighting' role which workers are sometimes expected to fulfil. There appears to be a need for greater clarity about the nature of the role street-workers play and the type and degree of control they are able to exert.

About the project

The research was carried out between November 2002 and July 2003 by: David Crimmens, University of Lincoln; Fiona Factor, John Pitts, Carole Pugh and Penny Turner, University of Luton; and Tony Jeffs and Jean Spence, University of Durham. The analysis was based on a national survey of projects, 31 telephone interviews with project heads, 11 projects visits, group and individual interviews with youth workers and young people, a user survey, user case studies and the administration of a social exclusion inventory to 96 young people.

How to get further information

The full report, **Reaching socially excluded young people: A national study of street-based youth work** by David Crimmens, Fiona Factor, Tony Jeffs, John Pitts, Carole Pugh, Jean Spence and Penelope Turner, is published for the Foundation by the National Youth Agency (ISBN 0 86155 310 1, price £15.95 incl. p&p).

A complementary costing exercise, **Costing street-based youth work**, is also published by the Foundation. This was a separate exercise from the research study with its own authors.