

Mapping and tracking vulnerable young people

A range of agencies collect information on and deliver services to 'vulnerable' young people. Developments in information technology enhance the possibilities of linking information from different sources to 'map' caseloads from different agencies and to 'track' individual young people as they move between agencies and/or as their circumstances change. Anne Green, Malcolm Maguire and Angela Canny (University of Warwick) examined some of the advantages and limitations of 'mapping' and 'tracking' methodologies, identifying examples of good practice and the difficulties which agencies have encountered in building reliable, accurate, up-to-date and robust systems. The study found:

- f** Many different agencies are placing increasing emphasis on partnership working and information sharing in order to address the multiplicity of factors accounting for the disadvantages suffered by 'vulnerable' young people.
- f** 'Mapping' and 'tracking' are problematic and emotive terms, meaning different things to different people. For some, 'tracking' carries connotations of surveillance, yet the general view emerging was that there was little or no resistance from young people themselves to information sharing.
- f** There is a considerable amount of ongoing activity around 'mapping' and 'tracking', yet there are few fully fledged tracking systems. The information held is used variously to monitor destinations and to inform resource allocation decisions and interventions.
- f** Problems encountered in relation to tracking relate to limited staffing and time, confidentiality/data protection, information technology issues and difficulties of partnership working. Although access to hardware and software may sometimes be a problem, in general respondents considered that confidentiality, ethical and timescale issues were more likely to pose barriers to tracking. The different practices and approaches of potential partners relating to the recording and sharing of information were particularly significant.

Background

There has been growing interest amongst policy-makers and practitioners about the fortunes of 'vulnerable' young people who are not in education, employment or training. With increasing participation in post-compulsory education and labour market trends leading to an increase in demand for highly skilled workers, unqualified and poorly qualified young people have become more marginalised.

Recognition of the heterogeneity of vulnerable young people, and the multiplicity of inter-linked factors accounting for their disadvantage, has led to increased emphasis on partnership working and 'joined-up' policy delivery to provide the support such young people need. From April 2001 a new Connexions Service, designed to integrate existing advice and support services for young people by creating a single point of access through personal advisers, is being phased in across England. At the heart of Connexions is the establishment of a comprehensive and 'live' register of the 13- to 19-year-old population, which will allow monitoring and timely intervention if a young person is at risk of dropping out of education or training.

In order to support 'young people at risk' it is necessary to know:

- *how many* there are,
- *who* they are,
- *where* they are,
- and, from a policy perspective, *what works* with whom, where and how?

This study reviewed a range of 'mapping' and 'tracking' systems from across different types of agencies in order to contribute to the debate concerning, and contribute to the agenda for, the Connexions Service. It also raises issues of wider relevance to the research agenda on young people, partnership working, and mapping and tracking methodologies.

'Mapping' and 'tracking'

'Mapping' and 'tracking' are problematic terms. In the context of this study, 'mapping' describes the process of quantifying the population and characteristics of young people, and how those characteristics relate to each other. In an inter-agency framework, it is about measuring the 'overlap' between different 'caseloads' of vulnerable young people, and describing how services offered by different agencies link together. 'Tracking' is a more emotive and problematic term, used in different ways by different people. In the context of vulnerable young people, it is about tracing pathways through transitions with the aim of informing strategic

planning of service provision and intervening on behalf of a young person to facilitate positive outcomes.

In practice, a distinction has emerged between:

- *historical tracking* – tracking the progression of young people to aid the planning of learning partnerships and to inform careers education, information and guidance; and
- *interventionist tracking* – tracking in order to work with individuals in priority groups, and to provide essential underpinning for focusing services on such groups.

Recently, increasing emphasis has been placed on 'interventionist tracking', although 'historical tracking' remains important and, arguably, essential. Interventionist tracking requires more frequent and timely information than does historical tracking.

Existing data sources contain a substantial amount of information about the circumstances, attitudes and experiences of young people, and about their wider family, social and economic context. But differing data sets are usually held by a variety of different agencies, with varying degrees of efficiency, over differing timespans, based on differing administrative units and with differing levels of detail. Hence, there are a number of major stumbling blocks in the way of designing, implementing and using a comprehensive mapping and tracking system, including:

- a lack of strong and universal commitment from some partner agencies;
- resolving practical questions regarding *who* should be tracked, and for *how long*, *who* should do the tracking and *how* records from different agencies should be merged;
- respecting the provisions of the Data Protection Act and safeguarding the confidentiality of individuals.

There is a substantial amount of groundwork to be done against the backdrop of a great deal of activity in a rapidly changing policy, institutional, information and technological context.

Activities of careers service companies

The study's survey of careers service companies in England revealed an increase over recent years in information collection to monitor destinations and inform resource allocation. There is now a greater emphasis on keeping track of vulnerable young people, although there is a tendency for those moving between areas to be dealt with in a predominantly *ad hoc* fashion.

Approaches to information collection are

increasingly multi-faceted and pro-active, involving the use of formal and informal data collection. There is a trend towards collecting more detailed information, with an emphasis on achieving and maintaining high standards of accuracy and reliability. Also, more widespread use of electronic systems to collect, collate and store data is evident.

Key issues arising

Eight case studies examined in more detail a range of initiatives (see Box 1).

The establishment, operation, maintenance and development of 'successful' mapping and tracking systems involves a considerable input of *resources* – in terms of both money and time. The fact that available resources are finite raises important questions about where the resources should go: for example, how much is it appropriate to spend on the 'missing' and 'unresponsive'? There are tough decisions to be made, and lack of resources may mean that some groups, such as those moving in and out of areas, are either ignored or receive scant attention.

The study highlighted the importance of *partnership working* in underpinning tracking systems. The sheer number of organisations providing services to young people means that working with partners is, in the words of one interviewee, the "only effective response" in order to bring coherence to a complex situation through improved co-ordination. But partnerships themselves are complex and dynamic phenomena. Developing partnerships involves building trust and establishing 'win-win' situations (for both partners and the young person). Key individuals play a crucial role in setting up, nurturing and driving forward partnership working through the

establishment of 'ground rules' for co-operation. This process takes time: there is limited scope for short cuts. While progress may be slow, and often occurs in small, incremental steps, it can have a profound impact on policy initiatives. Resource constraints pose a key challenge to partnership working, but organisational rigidities and different 'mind sets' of potential partners may prove amongst the hardest barriers to break down. Indeed, 'securing agreement to take part' was the most frequently cited 'main achievement' in developing a tracking system.

Data protection is a major issue for tracking: systems have to comply with the principles set out in data protection legislation. These principles are intended as a 'framework' for, rather than as a 'barrier' to, information sharing. There is substantial confusion regarding data protection (coupled with an associated plea for clearer guidelines from government departments) and a widespread feeling that some agencies use it as a shield behind which to hide. Information sharing protocols have an important part to play in governing the operation of tracking systems and outlining the respective responsibilities of partners. Amongst individuals and organisations there are widely differing attitudes to confidentiality. Many young people seemingly take inter-agency information exchange for granted in a digital age - particularly if it might benefit them. However, there is relatively little substantive information about young people's attitudes to information exchange: this seems worthy of further research. The fact that there appears to be little evidence for young people questioning information sharing does not necessarily mean that they agree with such practices.

Box 1: The case studies

- *Hertfordshire*: Hertfordshire Individual Tracking System - a strong and committed partnership establishing a stand-alone tracking system covering 'vulnerable young people' with potential for expansion into an 'all age, all agencies' system.
- *Nottinghamshire*: Guideline Careers - an advanced and intensively developed tracking system, featuring the potential of developments relating to a 'Connexions Card' to feed into tracking.
- *Black Country*: The Black Country Tracking Project - a practical model of a working tracking project and of the types of information it can provide.
- *Tyneside*: Progression Observatory Project - a specific initiative developed using Single Regeneration Budget funding to identify and track young people who are (potentially) disaffected.
- *Teesside*: Future Steps – mapping and tracking activities featuring the development of a bespoke system producing management information and wider information pertinent to social exclusion, as well as for historical and interventionist tracking.
- *Merseyside*: Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership Pilot – exemplifying some of the issues to be addressed in developing a tracking system in an area with a complex institutional structure.
- *Inner London*: mapping and tracking activities at London South Bank Careers – outlining the challenges to mapping and tracking in part of a large metropolitan area with an ethnically diverse and mobile population with high levels of deprivation (i.e. a particularly difficult context for mapping and tracking).
- *Cambridge*: Cambridge Homeless Partnership, Young People's Sub-Group - a 'bottom up' thematic development, in which front line workers from voluntary agencies have been amongst the key players.

IT emerges as one of the less problematic issues in developing mapping and tracking systems. Yet, for much of the voluntary sector, lack of IT poses an important barrier to such development. There would seem to be a case for some 'pump-priming' here, so that voluntary organisations can play a fuller role in initiatives.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that, in the face of increasing information collection, it is important for all concerned not to lose sight of *why* tracking is being undertaken. It is not an end in itself but a tool by which support and help may be provided more effectively to individuals, and especially to vulnerable young people.

The problems and challenges of inter-agency working are considerable. The disparate nature of the many agencies that may be involved in a local partnership calls for an acknowledgement and understanding of the fact that, because of their different remits, these agencies often have different target outcomes and, invariably, contrasting indicators of what may be termed 'success'. There is a need for performance indicators relevant to a range of services or agencies, reflecting their common and agreed goals, and possibly for the introduction of statutory requirements on a wider range of agencies for collecting, storing and sharing information. In this way, success can be measured in terms of the effectiveness of the partnership as a whole.

Pre-requisites for the establishment of successful *data sharing* include:

- the establishment of confidentiality agreements between partner organisations regarding data sharing, and the design of protocols and formalised codes of practice;
- mechanisms to allow easy transfer of data;
- the need to inform the young person that they are being tracked and reasons for tracking; and
- unique identifiers for individuals.

There is scope for further spatial analysis, using postcoded tracking data, and for linking such data with other spatially referenced data sets, in order to examine spatial concentrations of disadvantage and the potential for local/area-focused interventions.

About the study

The study involved:

- *Identification of existing or evolving models for mapping and tracking vulnerable young people* - from a survey of careers service companies in England,

and from contacts with other agencies, to elicit details of tracking activities and information about other relevant initiatives.

- *Interviews with key informants* - to identify emerging policy developments, and flag up difficulties and solutions which had been encountered at the planning and/or implementation stage in setting up mapping and tracking systems.
- *Case studies* - illustrating the range of practice in mapping and tracking systems involving different lead agencies and partners in summer/autumn 2000.
- *Round-table discussion* - to feed back findings, reflections and recommendations on the basis of the evidence gathered to practitioners.

How to get further information

The full report, *Keeping track: Mapping and tracking vulnerable young people* by Anne E. Green, Malcolm Maguire and Angela Canny, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 324 8, price £12.95).