



Practitioner Briefing #5: The role of detached youth work in creating safety for young people in public spaces

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Young people's perspectives on detached youth work

'It doesn't have to be the whole world telling you, but if someone...come[s] out of nowhere trying to help you change this and say, "Yo, you can do something good" – that little piece of comfort can help you mentally as well. And you could be like, "You know what, cool, let me try again"'. (Young man)

'With the youth worker you can tell them, like, most things and they will actually help. They will actually act on it.' (Young woman)

'[The detached youth workers will] speak to you in a reasonable way – they'll chat to you and be like, "Yo, why'd you do that? These are your consequences now". But for someone to come up to the circle and be like – expect they know you from the system – Nah, don't do that. I don't know you. Nah, stay in your league... For [the detached youth workers] to come and speak to me – it's not like they're disrespecting me. There is privacy... Obviously, you think eventually when you're by yourself, "you know what, yea. I shouldn't have done that." Not everyone is bad in these estates. It's the choices we do, innit. Certain choices are good, certain choices 'aint good. No one's perfect. But obviously that's where they come in – they help us a little bit and they can talk to us like that'. (Young man)

Introduction

This briefing paper discusses the benefits and limitations of detached youth work provision in creating safety for young people in public spaces. It forms part of a programme of work by the MsUnderstood Partnership to assist the development of local responses to peer-on-peer abuse. The briefing considers unique features of detached youth work; whether workers enhance young people's safety in public spaces and transform the spaces themselves; factors that constrain the impact of detached youth work; and implications of the findings on safeguarding and commissioning.

Background

Young people experience peer-on-peer abuse in a range of social environments. As children move into adolescence, they spend more time socialising with peers, at school and in public spaces. Within these contexts, young people may encounter healthy norms that promote pro-social relationships or they may encounter harmful norms that are conducive to abusive and exploitative relationships (Firmin, 2016). Local responses need to identify, assess, and intervene in all of the social environments where peer-on-peer abuse occurs – in essence to take a 'contextual' approach to the phenomenon.

Detached youth work is one method of engaging with and intervening in young people's social environments. While detached youth work has changed over time and according to local contexts, it may broadly be defined as a type of youth work provision that delivers informal education to young people on their own terms and in spaces of their choosing. Detached youth workers develop relationships with young people over time and then work with them around a range of issues, such as employment and education, youth violence and child sexual exploitation. Detached youth work itself becomes one of the social fields around young people (Van de Walle et al, 2011).

Methodology

Over a six-month period, researchers observed detached youth work sessions and conducted focus groups in two London boroughs. In total, researchers observed eight sessions, conducted two focus groups with detached youth workers, two focus groups with young people, and two focus groups with multi-agency partners. Preliminary findings of the study were presented to and discussed by youth workers from six London boroughs during a roundtable discussion held in May 2016. Fieldwork data was then qualitatively coded and analysed using NVivo 11 software.

Features of Detached Youth Work

Participants in focus groups identified the following as crucial to detached workers' engagement with young people: working in locations of young people's choosing; and building relationships.

Location

Detached youth workers engage directly in young people's social spaces: estates, parks, shopping centres, and other places where young people socialise. Engaging with young people in these spaces reverses the typical power dynamic between young people and professionals. Within offices and buildings, professionals are in positions of authority, whereas detached youth workers must negotiate relationships on young people's terms. By maintaining a consistent and long-term presence in an area, young people begin to trust detached workers. Detached workers are then able to witness young people interacting in peer groups and understand the power dynamics within these groups in the localities in which they form. Workers come to understand the contexts in which young people live, allowing them to empathise with young people's realities (Lavie-Ajayi, 2013).

'When you're walking the streets and getting to know the neighbourhood and seeing deprivation, or you're seeing the vandalism or whatever, then when young people are talking to you about their area, you know what that means - you know that the shop down the road has been closed and looks awful, and the rubbish is out there, and it's shit, and the door doesn't work. You understand that'. (Detached youth worker)

'I always say it, when I go to the areas I work in, I can taste it, I can feel it, I can smell what's going on in that area. I put a foot on that pavement and I can feel, I can sense ... I have a good empathy and understanding of what's life like in that particular area on a day-to-day basis'. (Detached youth worker)

Relationship building

Detached youth workers must establish relationships before starting programmes of work with young people. In addition to maintaining a physical presence within an area, participants in focus groups identified the following as important to relationship building:

- Time: Detached youth workers often need time (months to years) to establish themselves as trustworthy and capable in the eyes of young people and their wider peer networks;
- Lack of an obvious agenda: Detached workers do not approach young people with an articulated agenda. The work is led by and developed with young people, which contrasts with young people's experiences of other services;
- Voluntary engagement: Young people choose to engage with detached workers – it is not imposed on them by a statutory service or court.

'It's because we've got a certain level of trust that I can have the confidence to tell them things. But if they came up to me and kept asking questions and nagging me like social workers... But again, that comes through the years. It don't just come straightaway. Like they've been there since we were little'. (Young man)

'Because S. acts like our friend so we feel like we can tell her more things by her doing that'. (Young woman)

Detached youth workers also form relationships with peer groups and community members surrounding individual young people. During focus groups, detached youth workers described the process of slowly establishing a presence in an area over months. To establish a relationship with the wider community, workers often reach out to shopkeepers and other local business owners, older members of the community, professionals working within educational settings, family members of young people and, sometimes, older gang members. In other words, detached youth workers form relationships with contexts as well as individual young people.

Creating Safety in Public Spaces

Once detached workers establish relationships with young people and their peer groups, they are adept at then enhancing the safety of young people within risky environments. In some circumstances, they are able to improve the safety of the risky contexts themselves. As conceived within this briefing, 'safety' refers to a young person's physical, relational and psychological safety (Shuker, 2013). Detached youth workers help create safety for and around young people by:

- Challenging behaviour and attitudes through dialogue;
- Building resilience to risk and creating safety plans;
- Identifying opportunities to disengage from risky or harmful behaviours; and
- In some circumstances, transforming the risky context itself

Building resilience to risk and creating safety plans

Detached workers encourage young people to think about their own safety in different environments. Although detached workers are engaging young people within their peer groups and neighbourhoods, efforts to build resilience tend to focus on an *individual's* resilience to risk. In practice, this could look like a discussion between a worker and a young person in which they discuss and agree upon measures for staying safe in different situations. Other times, discussions around safety may arise during planned activities. One detached worker described the activities they run as the 'carrot' that attracts young people to the sessions. During the sessions, workers can begin to address some of the issues that place young people at risk.

'She kinda like helps us be safe. She tells us what to do in case anything happens. She gives us an idea of what to do in that situation'. (Young woman)

Challenging behaviour and attitudes through dialogue

Detached workers engage young people in a range of discussions around issues of personal safety, risky behaviours and attitudes that promote harmful or risky behaviours. Workers may engage young people within peer groups or have side conversations with individuals—the interactions are often fluid. Young people are able to express their opinions and discuss their actions without fear of judgment. In turn, workers challenge young people, offering

them opportunities to critically interrogate their actions and opinions in an open environment, often within peer groups.

During one session, for example, researchers observed how the detached worker challenged the use of harmful language within a peer group. A young person would select a song to play and if a member of the group pointed out a lyric that promoted harmful stereotypes, then the group member who identified the lyric could put on a song of his choosing. Within the context of the youth work session, young people were able to practice and experience alternative ways of thinking and acting.

Opportunities to disengage from risky or harmful behaviours and contexts

Detached workers help young people exit risky environments by encouraging them to access other forms of support and opportunities. Detached workers in focus groups explained that stigmas around services like social care and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) often prevent young people from seeking support they are entitled to. Young people were more willing to engage with a service if recommended by their youth worker because of the trust in their relationship.

Transforming Contexts

Youth workers' presence itself can create a temporary sense of safety for young people and their peer groups in public spaces. Detached youth workers create safe social environments in which young people can engage in alternative ways of thinking and acting. In one borough, for example, workers brought young people from neighbourhoods in conflict together for a mechanics programme. Through the sessions, workers also engaged the young people in thinking around conflict resolution. While the mechanics programme did not resolve inter-neighbourhood tensions, it provided young people an opportunity to spend time with young people from rival areas and experience, temporarily, an alternative to area conflict.

At times, detached workers make the environment around the young person safer by addressing a need in the area that has created risk within an environment. For instance, detached workers in one borough identified that young people's involvement in anti-social behaviours (ASB) was largely caused by a lack of activities or opportunities. By engaging young people on the street, detached workers were able to co-design activities that occupied young people's time in constructive ways, which led to a drop in ASB in the area.

Yet detached youth workers are limited in their capacity to transform risky or harmful contexts. Detached workers are often not able to change the structural barriers and underlying harmful norms that create risky environments. The main impact of detached workers on young people's safety remains largely individualised – they help young people exit or be safer within risky environments.

'There's nothing they can do about it to be honest. What can they do about us leaving the area and having other people want to harm us? What can they really do about that? Nothing. What they can do is just try and make us stop that lifestyle really'. (Young man's response to the question: What role detached workers can play in mitigating violence between groups of young people?)

Challenges facing detached youth workers

Although detached youth work is a neighbourhood-based service, workers' ability to work more widely on issues of community safety is limited, in part due to a targeted youth work culture that emphasises individualised outcomes on specific issues. Partners' expectations place further pressure on detached workers to perform functions outside of the traditional remit of detached work.

Targeted Youth Work Culture

As a non-statutory service, detached youth work (and youth work more generally) holds a precarious position relative to other services. Within local authorities that have retained detached youth work after recent funding cuts, detached teams often form part of a larger 'targeted youth work' service. Targeted youth support aims to identify the needs of vulnerable teenagers and enable them to access early support; it is a preventative approach undertaken by different agencies.

Yet a targeted approach conflicts with what many see as core values of detached youth work, and youth work more broadly: maintaining flexible and participative methods around informal education. Detached workers no longer have the same flexibility to work on issues identified by young people. Instead detached workers in some areas must try to achieve prescribed outcomes – often around getting young people into education or employment, or eliminating particular behaviours (Pitts et al, 2002). An individualised approach further limits workers' ability to direct interventions at young people's environments (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013).

Detached workers also have less time to speak with shopkeepers, parents and other members of the community. In the past, detached workers were out in neighbourhoods 3-5 times a week for hours at a time. With that consistent presence they created a wider sense of safety for the community and provided community reassurance. Presently, detached work forms part of a much broader suite of youth workers' responsibilities. Managing multiple roles can impact detached workers' ability to engage with young people, especially when workers manage youth conditional cautions.

'We haven't got enough time to invest in the old style – going into the area and meeting with the neighborhood and the parents. I often find myself these days more – almost like – like avoiding certain roads because I know that we'll walk there and the parents will be hanging out on their balcony ... I know that sounds awful'. (Detached youth worker)

'You're wearing two different hats – if you've got a young person you're working with on a [youth conditional] caution and has no intention of going ... then you're the person that has to send that back to court ... But then you can see them as part of your group on a Thursday night, and you don't want the young person to avoid coming to group because they don't want to see you because they've not been going to you for cautions. That has happened. It puts you in a really difficult place'. (Detached youth worker)

Partners' Expectations

Partnership working has also changed for detached youth workers. In the past, within a community-based approach to detached youth work, partners included shopkeepers, park wardens, housing caretakers, etc. With the focus now on individualised outcomes for young people, partners have shifted to include social care, youth offending services, police, etc. Yet partners do not always understand what detached youth work is, and sometimes expect detached workers to perform functions that do not align with the skills or expertise of workers. For example, detached workers described the tension between the interest from partner agencies in receiving intelligence from detached teams, and the workers' interest in maintaining the trust of young people and the wider community.

Participants also expressed frustration that detached work is often seen as a tool for 'rapid response' after an incident. Some partners expect that detached workers will gather information after a serious incident or provide support to affected young people. Detached workers point out that they need an existing presence within the community and relationships with young people in order for such interactions to be meaningful.

'As I say all along, we are not fire fighters. We are not rapid response. What are we going to do? So what, you're going to send us out there. For what? It can actually be more dangerous. You don't know the area. You don't know the group'. (Detached youth worker)

Conclusion

Detached youth work offers unique opportunities to engage young people in their social environments. By entering these social spheres, workers are able to slowly develop relationships with young people and public environments and ultimately improve individuals' safety within contexts that pose a risk of harm. Workers also create safe spaces in which young people can interrogate their own opinions and behaviours, and try to embody healthier alternatives. In some circumstances, workers are able to transform risky environments themselves by addressing gaps that created risk in the first place. Yet despite detached youth work being a neighbourhood-based service, workers' ability to create safer

environments is limited, in part due to a targeted youth culture that emphasises individualised outcomes on specific issues. As detached workers adapt to the realities of limited funding, they often take on multiple roles, which undermines their capacity to develop relationships with young people and the broader community. Overall, detached workers continue to engage and intervene in contexts around a young person, but the impact is often individualised.

Implications for Safeguarding and Commissioning

- Commissioners should consider where detached youth work sits in relation to other services and partners. The methods and ethos of detached work do not always fit neatly within a targeted youth work model. As a neighbourhood-based service, consideration needs to be given to the ways in which detached youth work can maintain/create relationships with community safety partnerships.
- Commissioners should consider funding long-term, full-time detached youth work so that detached workers are able to build meaningful relationships with young people, their peer groups and wider communities. Detached work should not be seen as a rapid-response tool after serious incidents involving young people.
- Those with oversight of detached teams could consider developing group outcome measurements to capture the impact of detached work on peer groups. Individualised outcome assessments will not capture progress made within groups – for example, whether a peer group becomes a supportive, healthy context for those within the group.
- Awareness of the role and purpose of detached youth work varies among other services. This affects partners' expectations and ability to share information with detached teams. Those with oversight of detached teams could work to better inform partners and engage detached workers in decision-making within multi-agency meetings.
- The contribution of detached youth work in building a response to peer-on-peer abuse needs to be expressly considered in relevant strategic documents, actions plans and multi-agency structures. This is particularly important in areas seeking to develop a more contextual response to the issue.

If you have any queries on this briefing, please contact Danielle.Fritz@beds.ac.uk.

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