



National

POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: UK (1 OF 2)

'Risky Youth' and Criminalised Identities

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief, aimed at policy makers, practitioners in youth sectors and police, is based on a PROMISE case study in the UK that focused on young people who are engaged in criminal activity or seen by authorities to be 'at risk' of offending. It is concerned with the labelling of young people as 'risky' in multiple aspects of their lives by authorities, the media, and through public discourse. This culture of labelling has led to punitive approaches being taken towards young people, who also experience conflict in various facets of their lives. As a result, they are left feeling disempowered or disenfranchised.

Our research has found that safe spaces for expression (of resistance or engagement), and positive relationships with others (peers and adults) can result in young people being empowered to have positive impacts on their own lives, and the lives of others.

The aim of the recommendations is to:

- Raise awareness of the impact of labels and stigma on young people's immediate situations and broader lives
- Prompt a consideration of the initiation approach used by judicial and police sectors when addressing young people involved in criminal behaviour
- Add to an evidence base which highlights the importance of youth services, community policing approaches and the necessary funding for protection and expansion of such services
- The combination of recommendations could ultimately lead to a recognition of and opportunities for building young people's capacity for agency and empowerment

This policy brief focuses on four areas:

1. Labels and stigma as sources of conflict, escalation of which should be avoided
2. (Continue to) build positive relationships
3. Encourage expressive space
4. Recognise positive social action (no matter how small)

1. Labels and stigma as sources of conflict, escalation of which should be avoided

The research found young people experience negative labels and stigma in multiple sites of their lives. These include labels of: 'troublesome/risky' youth; incompetent young mother; criminal identity; academic 'failures'. These labels are embedded in associations with the care and welfare systems; family and peer groups; and the local areas in which young people live, and were a source of conflict with multiple agents, particularly those in positions of authority. These include: the police and broader judicial system; teachers; social workers; family members. In many cases, young people reported feeling that they were treated more harshly because of the negative labels associated with their identities. This perceived discrimination fuelled a lack of trust in such institutions.

Examples

General:

"If people listen to the media and like the television, then they get their information from that, then they assume that, because one person's done one bad thing and has got into media because of it, that everybody else is going to do that. 'Cause it's like that stigma again behind teenagers, and that one representative versus everybody else". (Keira, YOrg)

School:

"... felt so degraded that I just felt useless and it was like, it's not even the way like, it was the way he was saying it as well, very direct like, "You're gonna fail," like. It was, "You're gonna fail," like and after that he didn't even seem like he cared. He was like, he made his judgement, "You're gonna fail," is there even a point in teaching her anymore?" (Becki, YOrg).

Police:

"I think it was when we'd kicked... off in the children's home, and we'd caused damage to the children's home. And the police literally pinned us to the floor like we were full-grown adults." (Helen, YCL)

"If I was arguing with Scott [boyfriend] and there was a big domestic or whatever like, I would not ring the police, like no matter how frightened I was. Because I feel like they are definitely against me, definitely like. I've had bad like, things with the police, definitely, had bad times." (Amelia, YCL)

Recommendations

Developing young people's trust in institutions should be a priority and this can be addressed, to an extent, by pursuing the following recommendations:

- All sectors who work closely with young people, particularly with marginalised young people, should work to mitigate the stigma young people feel (as evidenced above). Effort should be made to avoid perpetuating these stigmas and labels by consciously applying society's moral code clearly and fairly, practising careful use of language, and avoiding premature punitive responses in situations of conflict.
- Groups should be provided which cater to the needs of young people who have experienced similar stigmas or labels associated with their identities. Stigma was found to be avoided, or overcome, when young people attended groups with like-minded young people or those who had shared similar experiences such as those for young mothers or young care-leavers. These provided safe spaces for young people, free of discrimination.
- Young people should be empowered to challenge labels and stigma through positive social action and generative action. Schemes to promote these actions, such as the groups mentioned above, should be supported, and young people should be made aware of such schemes and groups.

2. (Continue to) Build Positive Relationships

The research found that the labels and stigma explored above are the primary sources for conflict in young people's lives. Forging positive relationships fostered happiness, confidence and trust. There was also a significant negative impact when there was a lack of positive relationships, such as young people feeling overlooked, ignored and unsupported.

Positive relationships with adults, or those in authority, are identified as those with reciprocal trust, when young people feel listened to and have an open dialogue with adults. In general, young people feel supported by the adults with whom they have positive relationships, where they are also challenged. These challenges, sometimes arising in response to conflict, can see relationships with authority recast into something more positive where young people feel they have been listened to and supported with the intention of channelling conflict into constructive change and action.

Examples

Impact of lack of positive relationships:

"Obviously like me growing up in care, I didn't really have... 'cause I was moved around and that, I didn't have like a set person that I could go to and know like trust in and stuff like, and listen to". (Sophie, YCL)

Positive relationships with teachers:

"It was brilliant, like it was all right, like. I got on with the teachers well. I don't know what I can say like. I just loved it. I loved my school" (Jacob, YOrg)

Positive relationships with family and foster carers:

"It's been brilliant. Been there since I had my first kid. [...]And they supported me and stuff. They're like my mum and dad, yeah." (Sophie, YCL)

Positive relationships with youth workers:

"You're made to feel quite equal anyway. So like they don't, like the staff don't look down on you, like, 'We're staff and you're not.' They aren't like, they're on your level, do you know what I mean? They chat to you, they involve you. They're not like... they don't look down to you or anything." (Sophie, YCL)

Recommendations

It is recognised that many statutory and voluntary sectors prioritise the building of successful and positive relationships with young people, therefore these recommendations are not intended to undermine the excellent work already taking place. Rather, they are intended to pay greater attention to the expertise of those professionals who have positive relationships with young people.

- Building an evidence base can exemplify what makes a positive relationship and encourage best practice in institutions and across sectors.
- Positive relationships can flourish in many different settings but opportunities must be provided for this. In the case of this research, youth clubs have been found as important sites for fostering positive relationships, and funding for such sites should be protected and increased.
- Recognising the nuances of the ways in which young people respond to conflict is key to fostering relationships which recast authority figures from inherently adversarial to challenging but positive.

3. Encourage Expressive Space

The research found that young people need the space, both physically and conceptually, to express themselves. Crucially, young people should feel safe and able to express both positive and negative feelings and opinions. Such spaces are important for young people to test boundaries and explore their identities. In being challenged in a supportive relationship, young people have their actions recognised as legitimate, whether such actions are typically considered to be 'pro-social' or not. These expressive spaces are inextricably linked to the existence of positive relationships and provide the opportunity for young people's abstention, non-conformist or conflictual behaviours to be recognised as an expression of need and/or agency. The research found that when young people felt able to express a variety of feelings, opinions or identities, they were encouraged to adopt positive actions.

Examples

<p>YOT Illustration: He's not drawing me I mean it</p>	<p>YOT Illustration: "Do you want me to help you or go away and leave you alone?"</p>

"In a school, they're told about individuality and all that type of thing, but then there's these rules that are set to have seemingly positive impact, but they're not eventually – they're negative, because they're told constantly how to act, how to dress, how to behave, what to do, when you can go to the toilet. That type of thing. So it can eventually have... and then if you act out because you don't like something, then you're seen as a, that's a negative. And you're punished for being negative." (Kiera, YOrg)

Recommendations

- It is recommended that young people should not be silenced and instead, their opinions and feelings be recognised, even in cases where these expressions are difficult or unpalatable. Allowing young people to test boundaries in this way should be used to guide young people towards more positive feelings and actions.
- Both physical space and conceptual space should be provided for the above expressions, in all relevant institutions and organisations. In doing so, young people's capacity for expression should be recognised and encouraged.
- A broader definition of engagement, which takes account of the context of young people's lives and biographies, could be adopted in order to acknowledge young people's perceived apathy, abstention or conflictual behaviours as nonetheless agentic activity. The key to recognising such behaviours and potentially view conflict as an avenue to empowerment comes from positive relationships with adults and expressive spaces.

4. Recognise Positive Social Action (no matter how small)

The research found that young people reported a number of turning points in their lives, which had been significant in overcoming the negative impacts of stigma and conflict they had experienced. These turning points had been prompted for a number of reasons including altruism, maturity, pursuit of personal and professional development, and generally seeking more positive change in their lives. Most significantly, perhaps, is the range of these 'turning points', from the small and everyday changes, to the large and fundamental. We found that even the smallest changes can have the biggest positive impact on their lives and the lives of those around them.

Examples

General demeanour:

"I became, like, more respectful. 'Cause obviously, when you're younger, I would, like, if I was to be told off, I'd probably be a bit more disrespectful in a way. But as getting older, I just realised that, if I do something wrong, just like apologise and just respect what the other person's saying and just get on". (Marcus, YOrg)

Statutory intervention:

"Even though it's three weeks, three week don't really sound major, but knowing you have to get up at the same time for three week when I could have been lying in bed till half past ten, half past ten, eleven [...]Yeah, but I hope so. Like I even said like at the beginning of this course, like, no, at the beginning of my YOT order, I was like, "I'm making sure this is probably the last order I'm doing, simple." 'Cause I'm fifteen now, got, as soon as I go back to school I'm in, I'm in my last year, so..." (Liam, YOT)

Generative activity:

"I wanted to be a good person and help people. And helping people makes me feel good about myself, 'cause I know, I'm helping other people and making their opportunities better" (Aiden, YOrg).

Career path:

"now I'm working as a youth worker with young people, like, with care-leavers [...] It's working alongside the people that used to look after me. It's good. It's kind of one of those 'Look at me now' moments." (Helen, YCL)

Recommendations

- It is recommended that small, positive actions should be recognised and championed in young people's lives by the adults who work with and support them. The significance of these actions should be considered in the context of young people's broader experiences and biographies.
- Opportunities for positive social action to help empower young people should be provided for in both structured (e.g. volunteering schemes and education) or individual forms (e.g. more positive social interaction).

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This case study is based on fieldwork conducted between December 2016 and April 2018. The first phase involved spending time in spaces occupied by young people attending youth clubs and courses led by youth organisations and participating in activities (n=34) such as topic-based discussions, art exhibitions, film showings and dance rehearsals.

During the second phase, between April 2017 and April 2018, 21 semi-structured biographical interviews were conducted and recorded with young people aged 13-30, and three focus groups (using photo-elicitation techniques) were conducted with groups of between 6 and 8 young people.

Contact with the young respondents was made primarily through links with 4 youth clubs and support groups run by third sector organisations already known to the researchers. An additional group, run by a third sector organisation providing creative activities as part of the statutory youth justice provision, was also accessed.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	Harragan, A, Deakin, J, Fox, C and Kaur, B (2018) 'Risky Youth' and Criminalised Identities. PROMISE Case study report. http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/'Risky-Youth'-and-criminalised-identities.pdf