Helping to limit service access problems

In this research when young people were asked if they had a problem making journeys or accessing services they said not. Further probing using visual communication tools revealed a wide variety of problems that could cause attendance issues. Some practitioners in this research expressed an interest in using the visual research tools to encourage conversations about journey making with young people.

On the cover of this leaflet are icons similar to those that were used in this research. Please feel free to use them to support your discussions about young people's journey making problems that could impact their attendance. Other things that particularly supported discussions about journey making and service access included:

- Looking together at a local map to get a sense of what happens during young people's journeys

- Discussing different journey modes (using icons like those on this leaflet cover) to find out which ones were used, easy, difficult, liked, fast, slow or comfortable.

- Young people taking photographs or creating artwork about their journeys to support their exploration of some of the issues

- Talking about how transport and journey experiences can vary for different youth justice services

While doing these activities, open questions that were useful for identifying support needs and improving young people's journey making awareness included:

- How did you get here?

- What do you like/dislike about this journey?

- Are there ever any problems with other people?

- Which service is easiest/hardest to access (and why)?

If you would like further information about the use of these visual communication methods or the research more generally, please feel free to contact Sarah Brooks-Wilson at sarah.brooks-wilson@york.ac.uk or youthjusticemobilities@gmail.com - I would be more than happy to discuss any aspect of this research. More visual resources are going to be posted on the website youthjusticemobilities.wordpress.com in the near future.
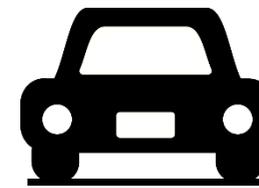
Accessing Youth Justice Services

A research summary on some of the problems and solutions

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Introduction

Research background

A body of existing research describes how some groups (such as those experiencing poverty and social exclusion) can struggle to access essential local services. Because such factors are well represented in the youth justice population, it has become important to consider whether young people have similar problems when attempting to meet their youth justice order commitments.

Recent research on youth justice service access took place in three youth offending team (YOT) locations. In total, 28 young people and 33 practitioners took part in 9 focus groups and 24 interviews. Research was based in the North of England in areas with high levels of education, employment and income deprivation. This research revealed that some young people can have significant problems that make youth justice journey completion difficult.

When initially asked, young people had poor awareness of their own service access barriers as some journey problems were part of everyday life. Visual communication tools became really important when exploring different journey making issues, with local maps and visual symbols of transport and local services all helpful for finding out more about young people's youth justice journeys.

Policy and practice background

A range of problems can be connected with young people's youth justice journey making including poor access to transport and personal safety risks. Living in difficult circumstances makes journeys harder, and journey problems can also have a detrimental effect on the quality of young people's lives. Although youth justice absence can be caused by many different things (including not wanting to attend), absence is also caused by journey making problems. Outcomes that can result from journey problems include:

- Young people's needs remaining unmet

- Youth justice order requirements remaining unmet

- Repeated absence, formal breach proceedings and sentence escalation

Youth Offending Team Support

YOTs were found to be local experts in the context of service access problems. YOT Practitioners and young people described how journey support made the difference between attending or being absent. In particular, staff were found to respond to:

- Local transport problems

- The mobility issues of particular groups of young people (such as those with particular needs or from particular neighbourhoods)

- Access problems in connection with particular services

The four main ways that YOT Practitioners helped young people access order appointments included:

- The provision of lifts

- The provision of transport costs

- Rescheduling appointment times

- Moving appointment locations

Some YOT Practitioners described how during the life of an order, informal practical support and coaching was hoped to increase young people's independent journey making skills. This meant that the provision of informal YOT journey support had three main benefits:

- An improvement in young people's local journey making skills

- Improved levels of youth justice appointment attendance

- A longer term increased capacity for young people to access essential local services

However, levels of support were sometimes constrained by the availability of resources and staff skills (such as having a car and being able to drive). Service access support could be resource intensive and require staff to spend as long as half a day supporting one young person, raising questions about the need to balance support and resourcing.

Young People's Service Access Problems

When initially asked about their youth justice journey making problems, young people in this research did not identify any issues. Further discussions using visual communication tools revealed how the following areas impacted young people's youth justice lateness or absence:

No family car

Nearly all of the young people that took part in the research did not have access to a family car. As a result, journeys were undertaken independently and without the support of adults in the household. Longer journeys could become complicated and disjointed compared with family car travel with factors such as poorly timetabled transport connections increasing the risk of absence.

The impact of parental problems

When adult household members had limited journey making experiences (such as when experiencing long term unemployment), some young people were more comfortable in their neighbourhoods, and less confident travelling to youth justice appointments. Other parental problems that limited journey support included limited literacy and health issues.

Lack of confidence or skills

Some young people found it difficult to travel far from home or undertake independent journey making, meaning that less flexible appointments could be difficult to access. In this research, young people with limited literacy levels, or who were engaging with CAMHS were found to have a lack of experience or confidence using transport and mixing with unfamiliar young people during group appointments.

Young people's safety

Young people described different risks when travelling to youth justice services. Rival neighbourhoods, hostility from fellow bus users and conflict in the street all presented problems. Even greater risks were evident when young people needed to walk alone late at night (such as when leaving the police station), or when hitching a lift.

Late buses

Young people described being late for youth justice appointments because of unreliable transport. This was particularly a problem in larger rural areas and when journey distances were longer and alternative transport choices limited. At certain times of the day, buses were full and did not stop to collect passengers when passing through young people's villages.

Bus pass problems

Cheap and free travel helped appointment attendance, but young people described some difficulties using schemes including expensive joining fees, the need for identification (such as a passport or birth certificate) and the introduction of discounted (rather than free) travel. These problems were particularly found for young people with higher youth justice contact levels on lower incomes. The timing of 'off peak' fare availability was particularly found to impact appointments scheduled for early in the day.

Communicating unexpected journey problems

Telephoning ahead to notify of lateness was important as it was described as making a difference to the outcome of absence, and whether formal breach proceedings might take place. Some young people had access to mobile phones and were able to communicate lateness due to unforeseen journey problems. Other young people were unable to notify of lateness because they didn't have access to a mobile phone, sometimes as a consequence of their low incomes. Young people weren't provided with a contact number for some activities (such as weekend reparation) making notification impossible.

Having to avoid some places

In some cases, young people's order conditions resulted in journey making problems. Some young people were confused about where they were allowed to walk, and when offences had been committed in journey making locations (such as the bus or train station) young people could become excluded, despite needing access in order to attend appointments.

Accessing Other Local Services

When young people accessed different services as part of their youth justice orders, a range of factors made it difficult to attend:

How far away?

If services were close by, young people described a variety of journey making options such as using a bus, cycling or walking. When appointments were further away and journey distances were longer, walking and cycling became less feasible and transport more essential. Some services could only be delivered at particular sites (such as mainstream education) making the journey essential for some compulsory youth justice activities.

How flexible?

High levels of YOT practitioner flexibility made it possible to support young people's accessing of a wide range of local services. However, some services were found to be more flexible than others and could make a difference to young people's attendance. For example, YOT practitioners described the need to block out half a day to accompany young people to some services where young people were not prioritised (such as housing). Other services required contact with specific staff for re-scheduling (such as the police) so appointment planning became difficult in the absence of specific people.

Making different judgments

Use of discretion is inevitable when making decisions in practice. However, practitioner ethos was found to result in a variety of decisions about how absence should be treated. For example, some weekend reparation staff would wait for latecomers before travelling on together to the reparation site, whereas others would routinely set off on time. This resulted in some confusion about timekeeping expectations for young people.

Meeting needs within and beyond the YOT

Staff seconded to YOTs were able to take advantage of flexible service delivery and support young people's service access. However, when young people's needs were higher it could be essential to visit external services (such as with CAMHS), meaning that young people with higher needs could experience reduced appointment flexibility.

The research that is described in this leaflet does not aim to make generalisations about all young people on youth justice orders, or all YOT locations. Instead, the aim is share best practice on the issues that can impact youth justice service access. In doing so, this research draws attention to the connections between young people, YOTs and other local services, when attempting to resolve young people's youth justice absence.

YOT Practitioners were found to be local experts and were very responsive to young people's youth justice access problems. Factors that influenced the type of support included:

- Differences in the delivery of local services

- Young people's varied journey making needs and capabilities

- Existing adult support

This leaflet will start by describing some of young people's main journey making problems before highlighting issues relating to the accessing of different services. Finally, the broad and varied response of YOTs to service access problems will then be described.