



mentoring projects



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A summary of the national evaluation of the Youth Justice Board's mentoring projects

The Youth Justice Board funds and supports projects to prevent and reduce youth crime. Between 1999 and 2002, it financed a number of intervention projects, one of which was the mentoring initiative.



The Board committed £4.5 million over three years (1999-2001) to fund 43 mentoring projects run by Youth Offending Teams (Yots), in some cases in partnership with voluntary sector organisations, with 39 of these included in the national evaluation.

Provision was made for each project to be assessed, and local evaluators were appointed by the managers of the local projects. The Board also appointed national evaluators to provide a central monitoring service by co-ordinating the activities of the local evaluators.

THE MENTORING ROLE

Mentors can play an important part in steering disadvantaged and disaffected young people away from crime. By building a relationship with a young person, a mentor can learn more about the individual's needs and problems, many of which may contribute to offending behaviour. At the same time, they can find out about the young person's interests and aims in life. The mentor's role is to provide advice, guidance and support to encourage the young person to develop social and personal skills, overcome difficulties and to counter the influence of inappropriate peer pressure.

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THE PROJECTS

The principal objective of the mentoring projects was to reduce or prevent offending. Many also aimed to reduce social exclusion and encourage social reintegration of disaffected young people by focusing on developing educational attainment and interpersonal skills. All the projects offered one-to-one mentoring.

The relationships were voluntary, with meetings often organised around specific activities. These were varied, and ranged from doing homework to going to the cinema. Some projects provided information on available activities and gave discount vouchers for those run by the council.

In the main, mentoring responded to young people's individual needs, although several projects also had a structured component to the intervention.

Eleven of the 39 projects were operational before receiving funding from the Board. Two-thirds of projects were located in urban environments, five in rural settings and eight served areas encompassing both rural and urban populations. Some included young people who were known offenders, as well as those at risk of offending. Others targeted specific groups such as first-time and persistent young offenders.

Almost two-thirds of referrals came from Yots. Others came from educational welfare services, schools, social services, youth voluntary organisations, families and young people themselves. A total of 2,050 (**57%** of those referred) were matched with a mentor.

The duration of the mentoring period varied between projects. Almost half the projects set the mentoring period at one year, five projects set a limit of six months, and two set a period of two years. Mentors and young people were expected to meet for between one and three hours every week in most projects.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE

A total of 3,596 young people were referred to 38 projects between April 2000 and September 2001. Projects varied in size, with referrals per project ranging from 12 to 239. While 11 projects (**29%**) received fewer than 50 referrals each, 14 projects (**37%**) had over 100 referrals each.

Of those young people who were referred to a project, 2,049 (**57%**) were matched with a mentor. Of those who were referred but not matched, **65%** declined the opportunity of having a mentor, **20%** wanted a mentor but a suitable match could not be found, and **15%** were rejected by the projects as being unsuitable for mentoring.

Three-quarters of the young people were male and aged between 13 and 16, and **85%** were white. Of those referred from Yots, **42%** were on Final Warnings, **23%** on Supervision Orders and **10%** on Action Plan Orders. A total of **63%** of these had no previous convictions, **10%** had five or more previous convictions and **5%** had a custodial sentence on their record.

The most common offences committed were theft, violence, burglary and criminal damage. More than a third of young people had started their criminal careers before the age of 13, and more than half before the age of 14.

Many of the young people's problems were seen as being related to school, parents, peer groups and a lack of basic coping skills. However, some young people had more serious and complex problems ranging from sexual or physical abuse to homelessness.



RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF MENTORS

Training for volunteer mentors was given a high priority and all the projects ran courses, 18 of which were accredited. A total of 1,712 adults completed a course, with **92%** subsequently being matched with a young person. Around **67%** of mentors were female; **60%** were aged between 26 and 45; **25%** were from minority ethnic backgrounds; **78%** were in paid employment; and **50%** had previous experience of voluntary work.



On completion of training, mentors had to wait for a day at least before being matched with a young person: **60%** waited more than a month and **40%** had to wait more than two months. Some delays were due to the need to make police checks for volunteers, as they could not work with young people until they had been cleared. Consequently, some mentors lost interest and withdrew from the project. Some projects worked to minimise delays by requesting checks very early on in the recruitment procedure.

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Projects stressed the importance of support for mentors throughout the course of the relationship. This could involve individual supervision sessions, appraisal meetings or informal contact with the project co-ordinator.

The ending of a mentoring relationship was found, at times, to be particularly traumatic for a young person, who could feel rejected, but equally traumatic for the mentor, who could feel

tremendously responsible for the young person and concerned about his or her future well-being. Many projects considered it important to plan for the natural ending of a relationship.

OUTCOMES

As reducing youth crime was the main objective of the projects, reoffending formed the principal measure of assessing outcomes. Data from the local evaluators' reports and the findings of a follow-up study conducted by the national evaluators were used to draw some conclusions concerning the impact of the mentoring interventions.

Given the nature of the circumstances of many of the young people, sustaining a mentoring relationship, even for a relatively short period of time, may be regarded as a successful outcome in itself. In the 18 months from April 2000 to September 2001, 2,049 young people were assigned a mentor. At the time of collating the data, **38%** of these mentoring relationships had been successfully completed, 27% had been prematurely terminated and **35%** remained active.

Leaving aside those still active, of the 1,260 mentoring relationships that had concluded, **58%** were successfully completed and **42%** ended prematurely. Just over half of breakdowns occurred before the sixth meeting. In nearly three-quarters of all cases, the termination of a relationship was initiated by an event directly related to the young person. The primary reason was attributed to the young person losing interest in the relationship and so withdrawing from the project.

The findings of the national evaluators were based on a sample of 359 participants. These young people were followed up for one year – and any subsequent offences that resulted in a Caution, Reprimand, Final Warning or a conviction at court, were noted. Almost three-quarters of this cohort were male and a quarter female; only 40 were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

- Within a year of joining the project, 198 (55%) young people had committed a further offence for which they had been dealt with by the police or courts.
- The age of the offender at the time they joined the project was found to be associated with reoffending. Those aged between 10 and 13 years were less likely to receive a further Caution or conviction for a subsequent offence than those aged between 14 and 17.
- The age at which a young person started his or her criminal career was highly significant: 62% of those beginning their criminal career between the ages of 10 and 13 reoffended, compared with 42% of those beginning their careers between the ages of 14 and 17.
- Whereas around 30% of first offenders reoffended, just over 80% of those with at least 10 previous offences committed further crimes. This finding was statistically highly significant.
- The rate of reoffending was examined in relation to the disposal that the young person had received before joining the project. Reoffending rates were lowest for those who had been given a Reprimand/Caution or a Final Warning (less than 40%), or who had been given a financial penalty. Those receiving community disposals or a custodial sentence were more likely to reoffend - between two-thirds and four-fifths did so.
- There appeared to be some change in the rate at which young people offended before joining the project and during the follow-up period. On average, it was estimated that an offender committed 2.1 known offences before joining and 2.6 offences in the follow-up period - although it should be remembered that the young people were a year older in that follow-up period, which may go some way to explaining the increase in reoffending.
- Females were much less likely to reoffend than males.
- There was no clear evidence of any change in the seriousness of offending, following participation in the project.

All 359 of the young people in the sample for the follow-up study had already committed at least one offence, which had led to their being placed on a mentoring scheme. The one-year reconviction rate found in this study (**55%**) is much higher than the reconviction rate of **26%** obtained in follow-up studies of national cohorts of young offenders which have been conducted by the Home Office. However, the Home Office study included a much greater proportion of first offenders: **65%** had no previous court appearances, compared with only **19%** of the young people in this study who were first offenders. Nevertheless, after taking account of the differences between the two groups, those on the mentoring project fared a little worse in terms of reoffending than the national cohorts.



CONCLUSIONS

All the young people interviewed said that mentoring had been a worthwhile and useful experience. Although reoffending rates are relatively high, these figures have to be set in context as, to a large extent, they depend on the offence histories of those joining the project. Many young people said that their participation in the project had helped to improve their confidence and self-esteem. Mentors also noticed improvements in the young people.

Where projects formulated objectives in relation to tackling poor school attendance and reducing the risk of school exclusion, some local evaluators reported positive outcomes. In addition, a small number also suggested that there was some evidence that offending behaviour had been reduced.

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Twenty of the mentoring projects have secured additional funding to continue after March 2002. A further 11 were in the process of seeking alternative funding and five were due to close through lack of funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing projects

It is essential that those establishing new projects are aware that it can take between 12 and 18 months before they become fully operational. Premises must be found; management structures and working procedures need to be established; and mentors recruited and trained.



Recruitment and retention of staff

Recruiting mentors can be difficult, given the increase in the number of opportunities to volunteer in different strands of the criminal justice system. It is essential that those who register their interest should be appropriately channelled and supported, both as trainees and as trained mentors. Criminal record checks on potential mentors should be undertaken as soon as possible to avoid delay between their appointment and when they start work.

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Building a relationship between the Yot and the project

Ideally, the essence of mentoring is an unofficial, voluntary, non-judgemental relationship. In this way, Yots should try to avoid becoming too directly involved in running projects, as this could deter young people from taking part. However, a strong working relationship between Yots and mentoring staff should be developed, and the appointment of a project co-ordinator who can liaise with the Yot will ensure that the young person is receiving effective and timely intervention.

The full report on which this summary is based is
available on the Youth Justice Board website.

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