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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(England)

DESCRIPTIONS OF INNOVATIVE APPROACHES
INCLUDING PROFESSIONALS' AND YOUNG PEOPLES'
PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES

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THE EPPIC PROJECT

Young offenders are considered one of the groups most 'at risk' of developing drug problems and they are likely to be affected by a multiplicity of health and social inequalities. However, there has been very little attention paid to young people in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) in relation to drugs prevention policy and practice. The EPPIC project focuses on young people aged between 15 and 24 who are/ have been in contact with the CJS in six European countries (UK, Italy, Denmark, Poland, Germany and Austria). The project aims to gather knowledge, exchange best practice and identify transferable innovations and principles of good practice on interventions to prevent illicit drug use, the development of polydrug use and the use of new psychoactive drugs (NPS) among vulnerable young people in touch with the CJS in partner countries. The project website provides further information: <https://www.eppic-project.eu>

BACKGROUND

A key finding from the WP4 scoping study was that there are few initiatives designed to address substance use prevention for those aged 15-24 who are in contact with the criminal justice system in the UK. Following on from the work in WP4, two interventions were chosen to explore in greater depth.

- Project A, is specifically targeted at young people already in contact with the criminal justice system.
- Project B, is targeted at young people who are either already in contact with the criminal justice system or considered at 'high risk' of problematic substance use and offending behaviour.

METHODS

- Across WP4 and WP5, a total of 16 professionals/practitioners who had developed and delivered interventions for young people in contact with the criminal justice system were interviewed either in face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews or focus groups.
- Interviews were conducted with the lead professionals in each of the selected projects. These were the individuals who had helped to design and develop the interventions.
- A focus group with six young people from Project A was undertaken
- All interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed thematically.

DEFINING THE 'PROBLEM'

- Cannabis was identified as the most common substance used by the young people by the professionals, with alcohol and other illegal drugs being seen less often. Many of these young people smoked cannabis daily while still managing to maintain engagement with school or college, often leading to a failure to acknowledge any problems with their drug use.

- There were also concerns that young people’s information about the potency of cannabis was outdated and that they did not understand how newer, stronger strains (i.e. skunk) could affect their mood, motivation and physical and mental health.
- Factors raised as driving the use of cannabis included; peers, celebrities, social media, normalisation of use, self-medication for emotional/psychological difficulties.
- Becoming involved in the supply of drugs through ‘county lines’ where young people are sent to rural and semi-rural areas to sell drugs intensively for a period of time was viewed as an issue of vulnerability and exploitation of young people. This opened them up to other vulnerabilities of creating debts to the gangs, carrying weapons, exposure to violence, and becoming entrenched in the culture of drug use and supply through a sense of obligation to community ‘elders’ who they look up to.
- The attraction of the money that can be earned in supplying drugs was seen as a major factor for young people who would otherwise have no income, an issue that was seen as a barrier to engaging these young people in education or training as a way out of the drug supply market.

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS – PREVENTION APPROACHES

- For young people seen in criminal justice settings, practitioners indicated that prevention needed to be defined as widely as possible to include primary prevention, treatment and harm reduction. It was important to keep them safe in the first instance as they did not feel that it was always possible to prevent or discourage use entirely.
- Preventing young people getting involved in the supply of drugs was also a key part of prevention interventions.

Universal, selective and indicated prevention approaches

- In England, universal drug prevention is a statutory part of the science curriculum for schools and can be expanded through the non-statutory personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme. Project staff and the young people interviewed felt that there was a need for universal prevention initiatives to start earlier at school.
- Young people with poor school attendance and engagement in school or other organised activities are likely to miss out on universal programmes.
- Some selective programmes have aimed to identify ‘at-risk’ children and families or have focused on ‘vulnerable’ groups, such as young offenders, looked-after children, care leavers, those not in education, employment and training, young homeless people, etc., many of whom experience multiple problems. However, this approach could be seen to be stigmatizing these young people.
- Young people themselves could be reluctant to engage with drug specific interventions through the YOT as it is seen as an establishment organisation that is not fully trusted by some of them.
- The necessity of addressing drug use and offending as part of a young person’s wellbeing which included mental, emotional and social needs was stressed by all research participants.

A partnership approach

- Given the complex nature of the problems presented by young clients, partnership approaches which drew on a range of services were seen as a key component of providing appropriate support for young people in the criminal justice system.
- Variation and fragmentation of available support services in different areas posed problems. It was felt that there is a lack of sufficient knowledge about many smaller services in local areas that could potentially support young people.
- On the other hand, multi-agency working was reported as an inbuilt feature of the youth offending service, so young people within the service would have access to a range of specialists from different sectors.

SOLUTIONS – INTERVENTION CONTENT AND DELIVERY: GOING BEYOND TRADITIONAL METHODS

- Most initiatives include both group work and one-to-one support. Interacting with the young people on an individual basis was seen to be important.
- The importance of using modes of delivery that are up to date and engage young people such as digital methods, drama therapy, art therapy, spoken word, song writing etc. was highlighted in all the interventions.
- Adapting the content and delivery to be relevant to young clients also meant being sensitive to diversity issues and local cultures, demanding innovation and creativity.
- The involvement of the young people in the design, implementation and delivery of the interventions was seen to be crucial in terms of the success of the projects.

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

As outlined above, individual level factors clearly pose challenges to prevention initiatives, and influence prevention approaches, programme content and modes of delivery. However, major challenges also arise at the structural level and at the contextual level.

Structural level factors

- The sustainability of the interventions and the lack of adequate, appropriate resources was a major factor. Initiatives were started when a problem became topical, was seen to be on the increase, or was seen as particularly difficult; but short-term funding meant that few projects survived.
- As more young people are diverted out of the criminal justice system, those who remain have more complex needs requiring more time and resources; but resources have been cut and drug specific initiatives were being incorporated into more generic services.
- The transition between child/young people services and adult services which takes place at age 18 was particularly problematic in terms of the needs of young people in touch with the criminal justice system.

Contextual factors

- Changes in drug markets and drug dealing networks emerged as an important determinant of the problems seen by drug prevention workers. The emergence of

new drug dealing networks ('County Lines') involving young people became an issue which increasingly needed to be tackled within interventions.

- The criminal justice context and the non-voluntary nature of criminal justice referrals were seen to have a detrimental impact on how young people engage with the intervention and the working relationships formed with professionals.
- The youth justice/criminal justice context impacts on the ability of drug workers to work within a harm reduction framework because the target group is young and the emphasis at official level is often on primary prevention and abstinence.
- In terms of quality standards and good practice guidelines, there was an expressed tension between the need to be flexible and to adhere to standards (in terms of consistency and quality issues). While more traditional approaches, such as counselling, motivational techniques and other one-to-one approaches had a basis for identifying principles of good practice, more innovative initiatives had less to draw on.
- The importance of high quality work and care with young people was highlighted by the projects. There was a need to share good practice to avoid re-inventing the wheel in the youth justice field.

CONCLUSION

- Interventions are required to respond to clients with complex mental and physical health needs, drug use, offending issues and a range of other social needs.
- Prevention initiatives need to include the issue of involvement in drug supply within their remit.
- A broad definition of prevention is most appropriate when considering this target group.
- The challenges of engaging this group of young people were recognised. The need to build trust, to relate interventions closely to 'where the young people are at' and to use visual materials and interactive approaches in line with young people's current knowledge and expectations was crucial.
- There are also other challenges arising from the contexts in which initiatives were delivered (e.g. tensions between criminal justice principles and harm reduction approaches) and structural issues such as reduction in resources and funding and poor sustainability of interventions.