



barriers to engagement



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuenctid

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A summary of research into barriers to engagement in education, training and employment

BACKGROUND

This research was commissioned by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) to look at:

- **the barriers to young people in the youth justice system engaging in education, training and employment**
- **the best way of ensuring that they are fully engaged in education, training or employment.**

This research supports the work of the YJB, which has made education, training and employment a high priority. One of the 2004/07 performance indicators it has set for youth offending teams (YOTs) is to “ensure that at least **90%** of young offenders are in suitable, full-time education, training and employment during and at the end of sentence by March 2006.”^{1,2}

Research evidence suggests that engagement in education and training is one of the most important factors in reducing offending and reoffending. In this context, a number of specific elements are closely associated with offending by young people:

- **detachment from education (including non-attendance, formal and informal exclusion, and limited or part-time alternative provision)**

1. This performance indicator is no longer time limited.
2. It is important to emphasise that the role of the YOTs is primarily to advocate and broker access to education, training and employment, both strategically and on behalf of individual young people. The direct control of these services lies outside their remit.

- **low attainment (especially in literacy and numeracy)**
- **influence of the school (including lack of a clear school ethos, poor discipline and bullying)**
- **experience of custody and local authority care, which are associated with detachment from education and low attainment.**

The evidence suggests that early and sustained intervention to maintain attachment and attainment has a greater chance of success than trying to equip older young people with literacy and numeracy skills, once they have become detached from mainstream learning.

Interventions shown to address these factors include:

- **pre-school education**
- **family literacy**
- **parenting information and support**
- **reasoning and social skills education**
- **organisational change in schools**
- **reading schemes**
- **maintaining attendance at school by means of:**
 - **prompt response to absence**
 - **providing support**
 - **involving parents/carers**
 - **prompt provision of alternative full-time programmes for those who have become detached**
- **learner-centred individualised programmes to motivate young people to gain basic skills**
- **whole-school approaches that adopt a positive and inclusive ethos, and develop strong staff – pupil relationships.**

THE RESEARCH

The research began in September 2003, and was completed in December 2004.

It was based on:

- **quantitative data from YOTs, consisting of a census of young people's education, training and employment, and analysis of *Asset***
- **qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews with staff and young people in the youth justice system.**

The aim of the research was to gain understanding of the:

- **barriers to engagement at all levels**
- **scope of the problem**
- **effectiveness of existing policies**
- **extent and effectiveness of innovative practice**
- **strategic implications for future effective practice**

Census and *Asset* data

The census survey was the first attempt through research to estimate the engagement in education, training and employment of young people in the youth justice system in England and Wales. It sought to measure access to, and participation in, education, training and employment provision, and also explore issues relating to the suitability and legitimacy of education, training and employment placements.



Data were obtained from 48 YOTs (approximately **30%** of all YOTs) on 5,658 young people. Comparison with the demographic and criminological profile of the national youth justice population showed the sample to be largely representative. Approximately **60%** of the sample were below school-age.

In addition, data on key measures of education, training and employment status were obtained from *Asset* and the census form. These were:

- **the amount³ of education, training and employment arranged and received for the census week in June 2004**
- **the type and dosage of education, training and employment arranged and received for the census day**
- **their full-time education, training and employment status for the last three months (obtained from the census information)**
- **their education, training and employment status, as recorded on their current *Asset* form (measured by “main source of education provision in the previous six months” and “situation in regard to employment, training and further education”⁴).**

Interviews and questionnaires

Fifty young people, serving a range of community and custodial sentences, were interviewed, at least once, about their educational experiences. Most had experienced a number of education placements, and were engaged in education, training and employment provision.

Forty-one YOT managers returned questionnaires, and interviews were carried out with 54 members of staff from YOTs, young offender institutions (YOIs) and local authority secure children’s homes.

3. Usually measured in hours per week against a benchmark of 25 hours.

4. In the education section of *Asset*.

FINDINGS

Census and Asset data

- **On a given day, only between 35% and 45% of young people in the youth justice system are receiving full-time education, training or employment.**
- **The YOTs in the sample are struggling with very serious access issues to full-time education, training and employment. Only 45% of the young people in the sample had access to full-time provision during the census week, and 28% had no provision arranged at all.**
- **The young people who were significantly less likely to have full-time education, training and employment provision:**
 - were older (particularly those aged 16)
 - were female
 - had been in the care system
 - had literacy or numeracy difficulties
 - had previous convictions
 - had been subject to more serious disposals
 - were more likely to reoffend.
- **Only around half those of statutory school age were reported as having full-time education arranged. For those in their final year of compulsory schooling, there was an even lower proportion in full-time education.**
- **Dubious practices, such as informal exclusions or inappropriate study-leave on the part of some schools, coupled with delays and a lack of alternative educational provision on the part of local education authorities,⁵ were reported in the census.**
- **The census findings suggest that education, training and employment figures reported by YOTs in their quarterly returns to the YJB may be considerable overestimates of the proportion of young people in receipt of full-time provision. The corresponding YJB quarterly figures were significantly higher than the percentages obtained in the census, for all YOTs in the sample.**

5. Local education authorities are gradually being replaced by local children's services.

Interviews and questionnaires

Staff

YOT managers and staff from custodial establishments identified practical barriers to engagement in education, training and employment, including:

- **lack of suitable education, training and employment provision, such as home tuition and places in pupil referral units**
- **complex rules on benefits and allowances, some of which provide disincentives to engage with training**
- **lack of continuity for learning between custody and the community**
- **lack of support and specialist help for young people with identified special educational needs, and lack of willingness on the part of educationalists to tackle the causes of behavioural problems**
- **lack of suitable provision, such as suitable programmes for the least able young people, or places on trade courses**
- **inability of young people to gain access to existing provision where providers could choose to exclude or remove the more difficult young people from schools.**

Suggestions from staff overcoming these barriers included:

- **increasing the range of programmes available for young people with special needs or poor literacy and numeracy skills**
- **introducing greater flexibility into the National Curriculum**
- **developing guidelines for the curriculum in alternative education programmes and the qualifications offered**
- **introducing systems to register and evaluate the work of alternative providers.**

Staff from custodial settings identified further ideas for overcoming the barriers, including:

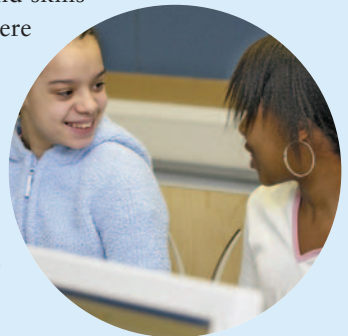
- **involving young people in their own target-setting when their individual learning plans are being drawn up**
- **providing one-to-one support in custody, both to deal with problem behaviour and to assist with learning difficulties and motivation**
- **increased use of Release On Temporary Licence towards the end of the period in custody**
- **encouraging prison officers to take a more active interest in the education, training and employment of young people**
- **better liaison between YOIs and YOTs**
- **ensuring that provision for young people is arranged as quickly as possible when they leave custody; or bridging provision while negotiations continue with mainstream providers**
- **further training for staff in how to motivate disengaged young people.**



Suggestions from the staff interviewed about improving the situation included:

- **better communication between agencies via formal protocols for joint working, multi-agency panels to discuss the most problematic individuals, liaison with pupil referral units and school federations working together**
- **more one-to-one provision, with learning support, and involvement of the young people in their plans**
- **developing the use of mentors with Connexions and youth organisations**
- **strategies to support young people in the transition from custody to community**
- **adopting a holistic approach that addresses welfare issues alongside education, training and employment.**

Inconsistent links between YOTs, Connexions, local learning and skills councils and local education authorities were also identified as a barrier. More than half of YOTs had no protocol agreed with their local learning and skills councils. In addition, problems were identified with the funding arrangements for local learning and skills councils, which depend on trainees achieving vocational qualifications. These rules discriminate against those with low attainment levels and records of poor previous participation.



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Young people

The barriers young people identified most commonly were a lack of qualifications and having a criminal record. Many of them assumed personal responsibility for their lack of engagement, mentioning, for example:

- **lack of achievement**
- **bullying**
- **difficult relationships with teachers**
- **lack of interest in school.**

Their views reflected the education risk factors identified in previous research. These were:

- **detachment**

Many young people had been excluded or absented themselves from classes in which they were not doing well; detachment also occurred if they were being bullied or wanted to spend time with friends who were not in school.

- **low attainment**

Many young people felt their educational ability was below that of their peers.

- **influence of the school**

Bullying and the reaction of teachers and the school to it featured in many responses. Relationships with teachers were important, as were small class sizes.

- **custody**

Some young people gave specific examples of custody disrupting their schooling or college courses.⁶

6. The views of educationalists, obtained through a separate study, identified a different set of barriers. Most managers of further education provision believed colleges to be a suitable option for 10 to 17-year-olds on release from custody. While most staff of secondary schools believed that the attitudes and behaviour of the young people were the most important barriers, school teachers also identified their own lack of appropriate knowledge and skills and lack of time as critical. They suggested that these might be overcome by behavioural support, one-to-one support in lessons, special educational needs co-ordinating officer support, access to further education bridging courses, and parents'/carers' support groups.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Failure to recognise the scale and nature of the problem.**

Although the census showed that a large proportion of young people are not participating in education and training, this is not fully recognised or reflected in official statistics. Without agreement on the scale of the problem, at national and local level, it will be difficult to make a major change in their engagement.
- **Professional lack of knowledge.**

Many managers and practitioners in both secondary and further education lack sufficient knowledge of the youth justice system and how to meet the learning needs of young people who offend.
- **Conflicting objectives and targets.**

The YJB's education target is not recognised by schools and further education colleges. The youth justice system focuses on the individual young person, while educational institutions focus on the group. Each agency works to different targets, which often conflict.
- **Confused responsibilities.**

Responsibility for the education of the hard-to-reach appears to be a baton that is regularly passed and frequently dropped. It can fall between schools, local education authorities, custodial institutions and local learning and skills councils, with YOTs and Connexions partnerships being intermediaries, often for limited periods of time.
- **Ineffective and non-existent protocols.**

Agreed protocols between the agencies are required by the YJB's *National Standards*, but they are often absent or ineffective – or the agencies do not follow the procedures contained in them.
- **Limited and late transmission of key information.**

YOTs often receive poor information about the educational situation of young people, hampering the effective assessment of need, planning and review. Educationalists in secure establishments also often fail to receive basic information about the special educational needs of those in their care.



This research gives us a very significant set of data in terms of both scale and detail. It underlines the challenges faced by YOTs in gaining access to, and supporting, young people in full-time education and training. It seems clear that the most serious barriers lie within the education system, where there appears to be a combination of a shortage of places, coupled with an apparent unwillingness on the part of some schools or colleges to finding timely, full-time mainstream placements.

In relation to alternative education placements, these returns supported by practitioner comments indicate a significant lack of provision by local education authorities to enable timely and full-time access.

For practitioners working in the youth justice system, the challenge of identifying barriers to access and participation is linked to their need to identify locally the variety of agencies responsible for education and training, and to understand the complexity of provision across the regions. There was, however, frustration among YOT staff that they often have to negotiate with local education authorities and local learning and skills councils for suitable provision to be made available to young people, regardless of any notion of a right to education.

The YJB target of **90%** of young people in suitable full-time education, training and employment by March 2006⁷ is being pursued by the YOTs, with YOT practitioners accepting its importance as a key risk factor for young people.

The YOTs appear to be making greater progress than custodial establishments in forging links with education, training and

7. At the time of publication, this is no longer time limited.

barriers to engagement

employment providers, Connexions, local education authorities and local learning and skills councils. However, a lack of both strategic agreement (protocols) and operational working were identified, as agencies struggle to work together in the resettlement of young people, and to share information.

Effective multi-agency working, where agencies understand the priorities, cultures and procedures of other agencies, was not found to be in place.

In the context of the main findings that there is a lower level of engagement in education, training and employment than some official figures indicate, caution has been taken in the interpretation of the data, erring on the side of higher estimates of engagement than some of the incomplete or ambiguous returns imply. This cautious approach, coupled with the demographic, educational and criminological profile of those with incomplete data, provide some evidence to suggest that the levels of engagement in education, training and employment may in fact be lower than the **35% to 45%** found in this analysis. Further research is required however to explore this.



The challenge for the YJB is how to bring about significant changes in both policy and practice when they are outside its direct control. Although it is a daunting challenge, there are indications of a willingness on the part of some elements of the education system to work with it more closely to span this divide.

However, the basic question needs to change from “how do we engage these young people in education?”, to “how do we engage the education and training system in meeting the needs of young people at risk of offending or reoffending?”

Changing the behaviour of institutions and professions is widely recognised as being extremely challenging, so there is no easy solution to the problem of ensuring the educational access, participation and progression of young people within the youth justice system. While the recommendations of the Audit Commission’s *Youth Justice 2004: A Review of the Reformed Youth Justice System* – if fully implemented – would go a long way to bridging this divide, there is more that could be done.

One danger is that, in identifying barriers to young people participating in education, training and employment, the problem of lack of engagement is located with the young person, with a corresponding failure to recognise the extent to which the system is creating barriers to engagement. Strategic managers in youth justice and education should seek to identify and overcome the systemic barriers to re-engagement identified.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Two general recommendations for the YJB arise from this research.

- **It should design and introduce an educational framework for those in the youth justice system, akin to that devised for Quality Protects,⁸ that could engage both schools and local education authorities.**
- **It should lead a communication initiative to raise public and professional awareness of the importance of educational risk factors in offending. The initiative should also promote a new approach to community sentences built around education.**

Intensive and sustained efforts will be needed to ensure that key bodies, such as professional associations within schools, take these issues more seriously.

Specific recommendations are to:

- **extend the remit of the annual census to include local education authorities as well as local learning and skills councils and Connexions partnerships**
- **issue detailed guidance to schools to promote the educational attainment of young people who offend**
- **introduce detailed educational reintegration measures for schools, for example continuity of learning materials or arranged visits through Release on Temporary Licence**
- **develop joint training for schools and YOTs, building on education, training and employment in-service education and training (INSET), with an emphasis on effective information exchange**

8. This is a Government initiative to ensure that looked-after children receive the services to which they are entitled.

- bring the further education sector into an effective working relationship with the youth justice system, particularly in the community⁹
- devise and disseminate standard protocols for inter-agency working, and make sure that these are monitored effectively
- amend counting rules for YJB and education, training and employment returns, with regard to study-leave
- devise and disseminate standard protocols for local education authorities and local learning and skills councils, and make sure that these are monitored effectively
- review the current education, training and employment data returns from YOTs to the YJB to ensure both their validation and applicability to measuring the YJB's target
- develop effective dissemination of information on education matters to magistrates through, for instance, training and the Youth Court Bench Book so that they can act more confidently on access, participation and progression issues, and be more encouraged to use community sentences



intensive and **sustained** efforts will be needed to **ensure** that **key bodies**, such as **professional associations** within **schools**, take these issues **more seriously**

9. This work is now under way.

The YJB, in conjunction with the Department for Education and Skills, should consider the extensive lack of access to full-time provision for statutory school-age young people in the youth justice system, and undertake the following:

- **extend the remit of the annual census to include local education authorities as well as local learning and skills councils and Connexions**
- **issue guidance to schools on how to promote the educational participation and attainment of young people who offend, in the areas of:**
 - curriculum
 - assessment
 - welfare
 - guidance
 - continuity
 - study leave
- **devise and introduce detailed educational reintegration measures taking account of the educational issues identified in these surveys**
- **develop joint training for schools and YOTs (building on education, training and employment in-service training) with an emphasis on effective information exchange on educational access, participation and progression.**

The full report on which this summary is based
is available from the Youth Justice Board for
England and Wales website.

Further copies of this summary can be obtained from:
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