

DEVELOPING TRAUMA-INFORMED RESETTLEMENT FOR YOUNG CUSTODY LEAVERS A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

Introduction

This practice guide is one of an ongoing series produced as part of the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) programme, funded under the Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus initiative. BYC has been designed to challenge, advance, and promote better thinking in policy and practice for the effective resettlement of young people.

It is important that resettlement work is anchored in an awareness of possible trauma in the backgrounds of young custody leavers and in an understanding of the way in which such trauma can affect behaviour and engagement. Attempting to address current behaviour without such understanding can result in unsuccessful and sometimes detrimental interventions for young people.

This practitioner briefing outlines the key features of trauma-informed approaches to working with custody leavers. It also focuses on some of the implications that trauma and its effects might have for resettlement practice, following on from another practitioner briefing which summarises what is currently known about trauma and its prevalence in the backgrounds of young offenders (*Young Offenders and Trauma: Experience and impact*).

For a full exploration of research and practice literature concerning trauma, please see Liddle, M., Boswell, G., Wright, S. and Francis, V. (2016). *Trauma and young offenders: A review of the research and practice literature*. London: Beyond Youth Custody

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Why is trauma an important consideration for resettlement practice?

As highlighted in our previous practitioner briefing, *Young Offenders and Trauma: Experience and impact*, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that offenders have a disproportionate amount of childhood and adolescent trauma in their backgrounds. In addition to abuse and neglect, these histories can involve a wide range of adverse childhood and adolescent experiences including assaults and bullying, domestic violence, abandonment or separation, bereavement and witnessing family, school or community violence. Offenders are also more likely to have suffered brain injury during childhood and adolescence than non-offenders.

Offenders are more likely than non-offenders to have suffered adverse emotional, social, neurological and developmental effects from traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence, and some of these impacts also appear to be linked to offending behaviour. For these reasons alone it would be important for practitioners to be aware of issues concerning trauma but, equally importantly, the effects of previous trauma can narrow the scope for generating positive resettlement outcomes with young people and young adults. The effects of previous trauma can, for example, erode a young person's capacity to judge social situations, form attachments, cope with stress, consider long-term consequences, negotiate their way out of difficult situations and respond to authority.

Hence, trauma and its effects can have a great deal of importance in the way in which providers work with young offenders, the approaches taken to engagement and in the effectiveness of a provider's efforts to generate positive resettlement outcomes.

What is trauma-informed practice?

Trauma-informed practice may involve awareness raising and training, the provision of safe environments, reducing the scope for re-traumatisation and the coordination of provision designed to increase resilience and support. Trauma-informed approaches can be thought of as incorporating three key elements: an understanding of the prevalence of trauma; recognition of the effects of trauma both on those affected and on those who work with them (issues explored in the previous practitioner briefing); and the design of services which are informed by this knowledge. This briefing aims to assist this last aspect of trauma-informed practice.

Trauma-informed approaches – key features

The following four areas comprise the key features of trauma-informed approaches.

1. Staff awareness, training and support

Trauma-informed practice involves equipping key staff with knowledge about trauma and its effects and supporting them in their work with potentially traumatised young people – both by ensuring that there are mechanisms in place for individual monitoring and debriefing and by promoting integrated teamwork.

Staff working intensively with young offenders should be assisted in building their own psychological resilience – mapping out their own vulnerabilities and strengths and protecting themselves against vicarious trauma. It is important to acknowledge that particular young people may generate some negative feelings in staff, including frustration, despair and anger. Staff need to be able to disclose and explore their emotions in a supportive environment in order to manage their feelings effectively. But whilst staff may struggle to empathise with all of the young people they support, it is equally important for them not to over-identify with young people. Staff can leave themselves vulnerable if they hope to be able to 'rescue' young people as this may lead them to have unrealistic expectations and/or underestimate risk.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Raise staff awareness of the incidence of trauma among young offenders and its implications for resettlement practice?
- Train staff to build positive working relationships with young people (mindful of not creating dependence) and develop their skills in de-escalating and diffusing aggression?
- Promote integrated teamwork as a means of providing informal staff support?
- Provide staff with individual supervision that addresses the challenges of working with young people who have experienced trauma?
- Support staff in assessing and building their own psychological resilience and in ensuring that they do not over-identify with the young people they work with?

2. Assessment

As trauma and mental health problems more generally are likely to influence the success of resettlement work, young offenders' mental health needs should be systematically screened for, and responded to, with timely provision of appropriate specialist support. Whilst integrated mental health assessment is being rolled out across young offender institutions, it is imperative that this is supplemented by adequate community-based mental health resources and fully trained staff.

In the community, structured mental health assessments should inform the planning of interventions. Specific assessment for post-traumatic stress disorder, abuse and significant loss among violent offenders can be beneficial, although the timing of such work needs careful consideration. Also, when considering appropriate arrangements for assessment it is worth keeping in mind that:

- young custody leavers frequently complain about what they regard as over-assessment
- young people are often resistant to assessments which are perceived as labelling them as victims or as having emotional/mental health problems
- there is a more general problem concerning assessments that are perceived not to be followed up by any meaningful service provision – young people become frustrated at being subjected to numerous tests and then 'nothing happens'.

The general point to make here – which applies to trauma-informed practice as well as to resettlement practice more generally – is that assessment of need should ideally be linked to decisions about accessing appropriate services, rather than being part of a more general approach to 'fit young people into services that are available'.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Systematically screen young people's mental health needs?
- Understand each young person's trigger points and adapt its approach accordingly?
- Develop individual intervention plans that are tailored to the needs of the particular young person?
- Provide young people with timely access to specialist support?
- Support young people to become more open to addressing their traumatic experiences and more accepting of the idea of receiving therapeutic input?

3. Approaches to working with young offenders

Awareness of trauma and its effects can usefully inform our understanding of young offenders' challenging behaviour and can assist decisions about appropriate responses. Violent or aggressive behaviour can sometimes be adaptive for traumatised young people rather than being an indication of a lack of discipline or an absence of motivation to change. Punitive or reactive responses may then entrench problematic behaviour rather than address it, whereas support to build optimism, confidence and commitment can be more effective. It is important to openly acknowledge both the degree of adversity faced by young offenders and the specific challenges they face in adapting to new situations (particularly adjusting to custody or returning to the community).

Developing trust between young people and staff is important in order to help them overcome poor coping responses that may undermine the effectiveness of any interventions. Young people's full engagement is key as they need to feel part of their own change process, but they may need support to overcome emotional constraints and to learn to manage their emerging feelings appropriately. Young people with post-traumatic stress disorder who have committed violence are likely to need help to come to terms with their actions and the consequences of these.

Resettlement practitioners will also need to develop a strong understanding of the familial and community context of young offenders' behaviour. Young people may need help to overcome the stigma of having been labelled as a 'bad kid' through the creation of a new positive identity that is accepted and supported by both their family and the community that they live in.

Whilst the key aim of the criminal justice system is to reduce or prevent offending, trauma-informed resettlement practice requires consideration too of the young person's safety, the personal safety and emotional well-being of staff and the protection of the wider community. These three focuses are represented below.

Three considerations of safety and emotional well-being

Helping young people

Helping young people requires the development of a trusting working relationship before undertaking in-depth assessment in order to identify the young person's trigger points for (self-) destructive behaviour and plan appropriate interventions.

Ensuring staff safety

The development of trusting relationships can be quite threatening to some young people – especially if attempts to control behaviour replicate aspects of previously abusive relationships. Whilst it is important to encourage young people to develop (temporary) attachments to project staff, this needs to be approached carefully as getting it wrong can provoke abuse, aggression and violent behaviour. It is highly important therefore that staff develop skills in de-escalating and diffusing aggression.

Protecting the community

The full range of agencies working with the young person need to cooperate with one another to strategise and manage risk. Safe, accountable and defensible practice must be delivered consistently by staff from all agencies.



Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Acknowledge the adversity faced by young people who have been in custody and the specific challenges they face in adapting as they return to the community?
- Prioritise the development of trust between staff and young people, helping them to manage their emotions appropriately and overcome any maladaptive responses?
- Encourage staff to understand the context of young people's behaviour and support young people in creating a positive new identity?
- Prioritise building positive working relationships between staff and young people?
- Involve other agencies working with the young person in managing risk and developing consistent ways of working with them?

4. Consideration of the therapeutic window

Psychological interventions are most effective when provided during a therapeutic window: this is the stage when the participant is ready to address their difficulties and is in a secure enough position not to feel overwhelmed by that process. There is a delicate balancing act between exposing them to challenges that promote psychological growth whilst ensuring that those challenges are not so powerful as to reactivate the initial trauma and further diminish their capabilities. The trauma-informed notion of safe environments is particularly important in this context, as participants will only feel safe in a space where they feel protected from both further trauma and from people or situations that will trigger traumatic memories.

Balancing the therapeutic window

Overshooting the therapeutic window (providing interventions that are too intense or fast-paced). This may lead to 'resistance', although in worst-case scenarios can lead to self-harming and other avoidance behaviour such as substance misuse.



So resettlement practitioners need to exert careful control over the psychological intensity of their work with a carefully managed, sequential approach to individual progress. Young people need to be given the opportunity to consolidate their psychological development before moving on to more challenging goals. It is important to maintain an appropriate balance between psychological security and development – and when in doubt, the former is always more important than the latter.

This is particularly important in terms of the opportunities for change and the support required as young people make the transition from custody to the community. This is a time of high expectations for all concerned but also a time of great instability and consequently, a time of high risk for reoffending. So it is important to ensure that young people are supported during this transition without making unrealistic demands that may destabilise them.



POSITIVE PRACTICE iCoN CLINICALLY-LED OUTREACH TRAUMA SERVICE

iCoN stands for 'In Control of Now' and looks to give young people control over their futures. It uses a trauma-informed approach to work with those young people who have been assessed as experiencing some form of trauma.

iCoN is commissioned by the North East London Resettlement Consortia (NELRC) to deliver a clinically-led outreach trauma service. It is aimed at those young people who have experienced some form of trauma, but who fail to meet the thresholds for clinical interventions and/or those young people who meet the threshold but refuse to engage with services.

The service is clinically led and matches the young person with a trauma-trained coach mentor who supports the young person, on an outreach basis, through their journey with statutory services such as Youth Offending Services, Children's Services or education providers and others. If a young person is in custody iCoN is able to visit them as part of initiating the professional relationship. This work then continues through the gate and into the community.

iCoN coach mentors bring extensive experience in working with children and young people which is combined with an extensive training programme in adolescence psychological trauma and its management. Over fifty-two weeks, the iCoN coach mentors develop authentic professional relationships with the young person, ultimately leading to a trusting relationship. It is the 'trusting' element that is central to the iCoN programme – when the young person feels confident in their coach mentor they can open up more about their real fear, shame and/or sense of injustice, the hallmarks of psychological trauma. The coach mentor is then in a position to guide the young person towards expert psychological trauma specialists.

The psychologist's role is to screen, assess and provide psychological intervention as required by each young person. Any changes and unique circumstances are discussed and explained to the individual by the iCoN coach mentor to make sure that they remain active in their recovery. On average, the iCoN psychologist will work with the young person for four to six months in order for the young person to begin to open up about and address the traumatic circumstances they may have faced.

Throughout this process, the coach mentor is supporting the young person to engage with statutory and voluntary services. iCoN staff will be part of intervention planning and review meetings and will communicate clearly and regularly with partners to ensure that all are working together for the young person. Exit planning and sustainability are also key, and the coach mentor will engage with other professionals involved in the young person's life to ensure that this is achievable.

What kind of impact can the right interventions have?

By addressing the emotional and psychological needs of young people, services can enable them to better manage their emotions and behaviour as a first step towards making other long-lasting positive changes in their lives. Trauma-informed approaches that seek to build young people's strengths and attachments can help to minimise the impact of their complicated lives and traumatic experiences, reducing the likelihood that they will continue to engage in high-risk and anti-social behaviour.

Psychologically aware approaches recognise that young people with challenging behaviour have particular support needs, often arising from earlier trauma and abuse. Training enables practitioners to develop clear and suitably consistent responses to young people who may be chaotic and distressed and who have

learned not to trust. With more insight into how traumatised young people behave, staff can work more effectively with them, thereby helping them to gain an understanding of their behaviour, take responsibility for themselves and develop negotiated, positive relationships. This approach leads to much better risk management. It enables staff to work with the challenging behaviour of young people – rather than restricting their access to support until behaviour changes – so that vulnerable and chaotic young people are not excluded from services. This approach is sometimes called 'elastic tolerance' – allowing behaviour that might normally result in exclusion from a service to be tackled creatively and with flexibility, thereby addressing the behaviour without rejecting the individual.

Like adults, young people with support have better mental health and having someone to count on can significantly decrease violent offending among those who have experienced trauma. For young people who have suffered brain injury, specialist rehabilitation can also reduce the propensity for violence. A significant, long-lasting, positive impact can still be achieved even with highly traumatised young people whose development has been severely constrained as the brain's neuroplasticity means that it can rewire itself at least into an individual's late thirties. A focus on helping young people to build their personal resilience and social support systems can form an important part of that work.

Considerations for trauma-informed resettlement practice

Staff training and support

- Professionals need to be equipped with a firm knowledge base about trauma and how to recognise it – so staff and partners may need training in attachment/trauma principles.
- Staff will need support to manage their own emotions and deal with stress.
- Work will need to be structured in a way that facilitates staff working as part of a united team.

Client assessment and monitoring

- Assessment procedures should allow providers some scope for identifying key issues concerning trauma.
- Expectations for progress need to be informed by an understanding of trauma and its impact.
- Participants need regular and reliable feedback about their progress.
- Positive shifts in resilience, impulsivity, hope and self-confidence are important and suggest positive longer-term outcomes (e.g. reduced re-offending, employability and trauma resolution).

Programme content

- Programme content must be informed by an understanding of an individual participant's trauma issues to avoid inadvertently reinforcing problematic behaviour.
- 'Start from where young people are at' because misaligning programme content and individual need can cause re-traumatisation.

Programme delivery

- Work on the principle that services should 'do no more harm' using empathetic approaches rather than reactive/punitive ones.
- Provision of a safe and predictable environment is very important.
- Staff need to have realistic expectations and take longer-term approaches.
- A whole system relationship-based approach is best.

Coordinated partnership delivery

- Providing services for these young people requires an integrated approach from all the agencies involved, including the criminal justice system, social services and mental health services.
- Positive shifts in resilience, impulsivity, hope and self-confidence are important and can anchor positive longer-term outcomes (e.g. reduced reoffending, enhanced employability and trauma resolution). Given the importance of these shifts, practitioners should take steps to measure and document them as part of their routine monitoring work

Summary

In order to maximise the effectiveness of their work, resettlement practitioners need to be aware of the possible trauma that young custody leavers may have experienced. Only by understanding the way in which such trauma can affect both young people's behaviour and engagement with services, can we ensure that interventions do not cause further harm. Developing such trauma-informed approaches to resettlement work has the potential to deliver more productive and long-standing positive impacts for custody leavers, particularly those considered to be the most difficult to engage.

The Beyond Youth Custody team hopes that this practice guide is useful to you and would be interested to hear about your experiences of the issues raised here. Please feel free to contact the programme manager at beyondyouthcustody@nacro.org.uk to share your insights or discuss these issues.

We regularly update our publications which are available to download at www.beyondyouthcustody.net

This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, the Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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