

Young peoples' experiences of professional relationships within youth justice services: the impact of relationships on development and transition

Youth justice

Workforce practice

Youth voice

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Key takeaway Eleven young adults who had been through youth diversion projects in Ireland described the relationship with their youth justice worker as central to their development and their move into adult life. The authors set out a three-stage model of this process. Participants were recruited through workers who knew them, negative themes were not identified in the analysis, and the model rests on the accounts of those who engaged well and reported positive experiences.

About the study

Qualitative study using 11 semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 18 to 27 who had previously been involved in Youth Diversion Projects across Ireland, for periods ranging from 2.5 to 10 years. Two participants were female and nine were male. Interviews ran from October 2023 to February 2024 and averaged about 30 minutes. Data were analysed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis, generating three themes and nine sub-themes.

The transitional healing model, as described by the authors



Key findings:

- Participants described entering services with low hope, shame and difficulty trusting others. They associated the worker's non-judgemental acceptance, consistency and respect for confidentiality with a renewed sense of worth and a greater willingness to trust other people and services.
- In the investment stage, participants described the worker as a consistent presence who advocated for them, connected them to education and employment, and supported the development of emotional regulation, less impulsive decision-making and social confidence.
- In the regenerative stage, participants reflected on a changed life trajectory, took responsibility for past and future decisions, and described independence as including knowing when to seek help rather than managing alone.
- Young people also reported a desire to give back, including through career choices in youth or community work, and through not wanting to let the worker down. The authors link this to the redemptive script on desistance from existing literature.
- Participants described exiting services at 18 as difficult and out of step with their readiness. The authors suggest extending the exit age may be supportive for young people in youth diversion projects.
- The authors recommend that management invest in relational training, supervision, reflective practice and staff support, and that dedicated time and space be provided for relational working.

Summary: The study contributes youth voice to a youth justice evidence base the authors describe as dominated by professional and quantitative perspectives. Its contribution is a model of how the worker relationship was experienced over time, not a measure of whether diversion reduces reoffending. The authors state that many factors contribute to recidivism and desistance, and the relationship is one of them. Practice implications centre on normalising early apprehension, investing in relational capability, and reconsidering the age at which support ends.

Please note, the use of **peoples' reflects the original title of the article.*