Youth Crime briefing

Good practice in providing substance misuse interventions for minority groups of young people

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Introduction

The society we live in is culturally diverse – the population draws upon a wide variety of ethnic origins and cultural traditions. Research has shown that young people from minority ethnic groups do not take up drug support nearly as often as white British young people. A stereotype, that minority groups in poorer areas use and sell drugs, persists and some minority communities complain that because of this stereotype, excessive attention is given to policing their young people. We have seen evidence of the problems this can cause in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry where there are difficult issues around the police practice of ‘stop and search’ to be resolved. The worrying reality that institutionalised racism, often pervasive and unwitting, can have an extremely damaging effect on service provision was highlighted and needs to be addressed.

In planning and providing drug interventions for young people who offend, explicit strategies need to be developed and tailored to meet the needs of such a racially and culturally mixed group. This paper sets out some suggestions for good practice in addressing this issue and aims to help practitioners to improve services, making them more inviting to young people from minority ethnic communities.

The use of drugs by young people from minority ethnic communities

It is clear from research that the majority of drugs use, particularly cannabis, crosses age, class, culture and education – heroin being the exception, with statistics highlighting users as predominantly white. Little is known about the actual levels of drug misuse among young people from minority ethnic communities: research undertaken has concentrated mainly on drug use by white British young people. To date, the Youth Justice Board funded programmes aimed at tackling substance misuse, have noted that cannabis, followed by alcohol, appears to be the most widely used illegal substance by the young people referred to them. Although no figures are yet available, anecdotal evidence suggests that where opiates are used, there seems to be a growing use of heroin by young Asians, and ‘crack’ cocaine by both black and white young people.
Reasons suggested for poor take up of service provision by minority ethnic groups

Research for all age groups indicates that drug services are unlikely to be taken up by minority ethnic groups. A number of Youth Justice Board funded projects have indicated that smaller numbers of young people from minority ethnic groups are using their services. Reasons put forward for the poor take up of provision include:

- **Distrust of white agencies**
  Young people from minority ethnic groups are less likely to approach drug services than their white British counterparts. This is because such services are perceived to be run for, and by, white people. This was certainly the case, when initial intervention to address heroin use by ‘white young men’ was introduced in the 1960s. Many people see today’s drug services as extensions of this early intervention and that the needs of some client groups, including minority ethnic groups have been overlooked. Experience of racism in the context of other services, and in everyday life, creates expectations that an approach to drug services would be unrewarding and possibly unpleasant. Patel (1993) suggests that members of minority ethnic communities may be unwilling to use services associated with the Home Office due to its responsibilities for immigration control and policing.

- **Denial or fear of admitting need in the community**
  Some communities have felt that they have been the focus of unwanted policing or intervention. Mental health and social services have been felt to use inappropriate intervention, undermining cherished aspects of some cultures. Because of previous experience, members of these groups are often reluctant to seek help or admit problems. In some cultures, it is felt that admitting to acts of anti-social behaviour may bring shame upon the family and this may lead to suspicion and a mistrust of assurances of confidentiality. When undertaking a research project around drug use, Awaiah et al (1992) noted that it took six months to gain confidence from the community before the project could get underway.

- **Visibility of agency**
  As well as the issues of distrust, members of minority ethnic groups who use drugs are often unaware that drug services are available, unaware of how they may help, or believe them to be ‘junkies’ – a label they have not given themselves.

Good practice in drug provision for ethnic minorities

A major concern, identified by development projects funded by the Youth Justice Board, is illustrated in two parts: firstly, engagement of young people; and secondly, sustaining their involvement in any intervention. The seven steps suggesting good practice are:

1. **Researching community need**
   In order to ensure an appropriate and relevant information service for any local area is provided, research on the community make-up needs to be undertaken. This includes information relating to the cultural diversity of the population, highlighting different ethnic backgrounds and the types of services currently used by these different groups. Community need does not stay static; research needs to be constantly updated and evaluated to ensure suitable services are always available. Appropriate partner agencies can then be targeted to deliver drug intervention services. Such interventions will be far more effective if the make-up of the workforce delivering the service, along with the programme content are credible and relevant in addressing the local communities’ needs.

2. **Accessible location and accommodation**
   The issue of reflecting the local area’s cultural make-up is often forgotten when choosing the location and accommodation for providing drug interventions. Consideration should be given to the anonymity of accommodation – in that young people do not like to visit a location that is obviously known to be used for drug intervention or the criminal justice system, for example. Males may not wish to enter certain areas for fear of racist attacks. Females may have parental restrictions put upon them. Drug
projects should be flexible in their working hours and look towards partnership working with appropriate local agencies such as youth activities and sports clubs to overcome these issues.

3 Multi-agency networking

The benefits of multi-agency working should be recognised by drug services so that networks working to similar agendas can share practice ideas and learn from inappropriate, as well as positive, working methods. While services for drug users from minority ethnic communities need the support of mainstream providers, the primary impetus for developing responsive services must come from the minority communities themselves. It is only by communities taking the lead, that services truly relevant to users’ needs can be developed. Drug projects need to team up with community services, such as local agencies that are culturally, religiously or otherwise in touch with young people in order to provide a service which directly addresses the young person’s needs. Agencies need training that is tailored to beliefs and norms that will encourage users towards specialist drug intervention services. There needs to be an openness and willingness to change, so that in tackling drug/alcohol use or offending behaviour, a young person’s culture and identity are respected.

4 Culturally appropriate information

Leaflets should be appropriately targeted to potential service users and sensitive to culture. For example, information relating to alcohol or tobacco should display an awareness that its use is against certain religions and that there may therefore be a reluctance to acknowledge it as a problematic issue for young people within the community. When producing leaflets or displaying posters, thought needs to be given to the use of appropriate pictures, colours and typeset – making the service more inviting and user friendly to a wider audience.

Not all service users will speak English as their first language and it is important to be able to offer good quality interpreting services for languages that are prominent in the local community. Wherever possible, drug workers need to be able to provide intervention within these languages and have an understanding of the relevant needs of particular cultures. Staff should also bear in mind that when translating information on drugs into other languages – just simply rewriting the English version is not enough – the subject needs to be translated in a form that fits with the intended audience’s culture and relates more individually to them.

It should be remembered that white young people are also culturally diverse – not all clients come from the same background, face the same problems and require the same forms of intervention.

5 Preventative work

In the past, services have often concentrated on work with identified users; certain groups of affected young people may need to be targeted by outreach work. It is vital that all young people requiring drug interventions are offered appropriate services. Working in partnership with local community activities can encourage young people to attend sporting activities or youth clubs that are culturally appropriate enjoyable, and can provide the young person with a purposeful activity to fill their time constructively.

It is important to remember that the onset of drug addiction in most areas does not normally begin until around the age of 20. Preventative work done with younger children needs to be ongoing so that intervention is effective and prevents addiction occurring at a later date.

6 Working with parents

Culturally appropriate information and education for parents/carers who are keen to offer positive assistance to young people who are using drugs is particularly beneficial. It can help them support and work through a young person’s problem. Explaining the effects of drugs on the body and types of intervention available can go someway in stopping families feeling totally helpless when faced with the fact that a young person within their care is misusing substances. Support groups for parents and young people can offer the opportunity for them to get problems off their chest, discuss them openly, and help to deal and come to terms with them in a constructive way.
7 Intervention process

If a young person is to sustain involvement with an intervention, he or she needs reassurance that their surroundings are safe and that workers can be trusted. An atmosphere in which diversity is welcomed, along with an ethnic mix in the workforce, offers ongoing positive images and contributes towards pro-social modelling. An adult mentor from the same ethnic or minority background can provide ongoing support for a young person to sustain an intervention and after it is completed. An openness to difference needs to be maintained during the progress of any intervention and the exploration of cultural values should be part of any intervention, whether it be one-to-one or group work, and whether or not there are young people present from more than one ethnic background.

Implications for YOTs

The Treasury is to make funds, of £21 million, available through the Youth Justice Board to YOTs over a four-year period to tackle the issue of discouraging young people from using illegal substances. Work will also be undertaken to deal with the issue of equality of access, including the recruitment and retention of black drug workers and developing standards that are far more approachable and effective for service users. YOTs will decide on the most effective way of spending this money. In terms of providing proper services to all young people in collaboration with DATs, YOTs might want to consider the following when attempting to make interventions more approachable for young people from minority ethnic communities:

- the involvement of local community groups that are culturally in touch with clients and are able to deliver preventative services discouraging young people from misusing drugs
- whether to appoint a seconded drugs worker from a specialised agency to the YOT or whether such an agency should be used as a referral base
- the equality of access to services for ethnic minorities
- the recruitment and retention of drugs workers from the same minority ethnic groups as clients.

The issue of culturally appropriate services is one that is being strongly debated at present. Clear reasons as to why particular minority communities feel less comfortable in approaching drug services have been identified. Models of good practice in taking these issues on board and finding ways to improve provision have been recognised. In order to move forward and improve service provision, it is important that such issues are central when providing any type of service and underpin policy and procedure throughout.

Effective practice as suggested throughout this paper may be hampered by the legislative constraints within which YOTs are offering services to those young people who are both offending and misusing drugs. There will, no doubt, be problems in regard to confidentiality, issues around compulsory as against voluntary intervention, the enforcement of orders and information sharing. These issues will all have to be worked through. Proper consideration of such issues is vital to success. In the process, YOTs will need to be flexible in their approach to partnership working and sensitive to the working practices of partner agencies and community groups.

References

3 ibid