

MUSICAL PATHWAYS

An exploratory study of young
people in the criminal justice
system, engaged with a
creative music programme

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Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

A three-year research project, funded by the BIG Lottery Fund, was undertaken between 2010 and 2013 across eight youth justice settings in England and Wales. The study investigated the impact of participatory music making on health, wellbeing and rehabilitation of young people in justice settings.

Around 37,000 young people entered the Youth Justice System for England and Wales for the first time in 2011-12. Reoffending rates are high within this sub population. Young people who enter youth justice commonly exhibit significantly high levels of educational underachievement, as well as complex health and social need, relative to the general population. Commonly, youth offending behaviour is associated with social exclusion, deprivation and health inequality. Girls and young women are particularly vulnerable within this population, exhibiting high levels of psychiatric disturbance, self-harm and substance misuse.

Participatory arts programmes can contribute to health improvement, emotional resilience and social reintegration among criminal justice populations. Recent years have seen an expansion of participatory music activity provided by charities and Third sector organisations, involving young people. Music can have important cultural resonance for young people. While arts have been extensively used across the youth justice sector, there is a dearth of good research that evaluates such interventions.

Musical Pathways represented a partnership between a charity organisation, *Live Music Now! (LMN) South West*, a Community Interest Company, *Superact* and the University of the West of England, Bristol. *LMN* and *Superact* have a track record of providing participatory, creative music programmes within health and social care contexts. A project steering group, membership of which included senior justice professionals, musicians and an ex offender representative, provided expert advice and oversight for the project team.

RESEARCH AIMS

1. To investigate, using qualitative research methods, the meanings and values young people in justice settings attribute to music, how they identify with music, its relevance to health and wellbeing, its social resonance in terms of lifestyle, behaviour and social status, and its value as the basis for programme based intervention.
2. To assess the feasibility and acceptability of conducting a quantitative evaluation of health, wellbeing and social inclusion impacts of a participatory music intervention.
3. To explore pre- and post- programme trends in health, wellbeing and social inclusion for individuals and case studies (programmes).

RECRUITMENT

Fifteen music programmes were delivered to over 120 participants across eight youth justice settings in South West England and South Wales. Each programme involved six sessions of approximately three hours duration. Seven different musician groups were employed, either in pairs or in trio formation, who brought different genres and experience, though all had received training and mentorship from *LMN* to work in justice settings. The programmes provided participants with access to guitars, keyboards, assorted string, brass, woodwind and percussion instruments, electronic and digital equipment, and they were encouraged to engage in a range of group exercises to enable them to compose, record and perform their own music. The music compositions created by programme groups were professionally recorded to CD, and CD artwork was produced with support from a graphic designer.

The research used a mixed methods approach. 118 young people aged 13-21 years were recruited to the research across the eight sites, comprising eighty-one (65%) males and thirty-seven (35%) females. Study participants were volunteers who were able to give informed consent. All personal identity data were anonymised in order to protect participants' identities and privacy, and confidentiality was assured through data management, processing and analysis. In addition to approval from the Ministry of Justice, ethical approval was obtained from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the West of England's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Qualitative research, employing an ethnographic methodology, explored perceptions and responses to the music programme, focusing on links between music and health, wellbeing, behaviour and social inclusion. Participant observation was the main method of data collection and was undertaken at all sessions, amounting to approximately 200 hours of data. Researchers used field notes to capture what could be seen, heard and sensed as well as how sessions were organised. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were also conducted with participants, musicians and staff.

Thirteen focus groups involving forty-six participants were conducted approximately one week post programme. These explored participants' experiences, views and reflections of the music programme. A further thirty-two participants engaged in post-programme semi-structured interviews, of whom approximately one-third were female. Five participants then took part in a follow-up interview, three to four months after the programme. Additional interviews and focus groups explored the views of musicians, staff and professionals involved with the programme.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Seven key themes were identified from the observation data, including *engagement; group relations; identification; expression; becoming creative; and achieving*. Strong affordances associated with music programmes were observed among the young people; these included positive learning experiences, supportive group relations, reinforcement of identity, reflection and expression of challenging life experiences, and pride in achievement. These affordances were double-edged, with six mediating factors shaping outcomes. The realisation of positive affordances was contingent upon *musicians; transience; gatekeepers and staff; observers; facilities and resources; and time*.

The strongest influence on outcomes was the approach adopted by the musicians and their skills in establishing rapport, supporting learning and achievement, mediating group dynamics and responding to challenging behaviour. Participant-centred learning approaches were necessary, as opposed to didactic teaching. The musicians had to establish realistic expectations and match activities with participants' abilities, balancing their differing needs. Work with younger participants was generally more successful when undertaken in very small groups or one-to-one. Creative musicianship on the part of the musicians, combining skill, patience and flexibility, along with strong social and communication skills and empathy, produced the most positive results.

Transience, arising from constant disruption and fluctuating attendance, strongly mediated outcomes in a negative way. The general sense of flux, with participants often absent due to release, relocation, punishment and conflicting schedules, had a detrimental effect on learning and engagement. While some disruption was unavoidable, frustration was evident among musicians and researchers, especially when voluntary activities or education classes coincided with music sessions. Participants who missed individual sessions usually found it difficult to catch up or maintain engagement. Disruption also affected group behaviour, with disengagement behaviours and problematic group dynamics frequently observed. Fluctuating group composition not only impaired group dynamics but created a level of uncertainty as to who would turn up, right up until the final phase of CD recording.

Attitudes and behaviours of site staff and gatekeepers affected recruitment, participation and programme outcomes in positively and negatively. Good communication was essential for effective programme planning, especially in terms of working around institutional or security protocols. Potential participants were identified and selected by education managers. Staff also supported ongoing participation, although not all staff showed the same level of commitment towards the project.

The presence of observers (project staff and researchers, as well as site staff and peers) influenced programmes in different ways. On some occasions, particularly when recording their compositions for the CD, a small audience was welcomed and appreciated by participants; it enabled participants to show off what they had achieved, represented an important stage of achievement and fulfilment, and was cause for celebration. Energy levels tended to be high at this stage, as participants anticipated and reflected upon their progress. On the other hand, observers could stifle confidence, enthusiasm, motivation and engagement, especially during earlier formative sessions, when participants had heightened self-awareness and some displayed low levels of self-confidence. More experienced musicians managed, to some extent, to mitigate the observer effect and were skilled at managing the sometimes complex power relationships between participants themselves and between participants and staff.

Facilities and resources available for each programme also had an important bearing on success. Appropriate learning environments were crucial for the development of positive group dynamics and a creative ambience. In particular, space and time were rationed, especially within custody environments where it was invariably difficult to find a large enough space for group work or to have the full time allocation for workshops. As a consequence, some sessions were too short to allow positive group dynamics and engagement, and it was certainly the case that some younger participants would have made more progress had they had more time. Availability of musical instruments and equipment was also important; most of the equipment required had to be brought into establishments via security at each visit, while some sites were able to provide additional instruments and equipment.

These findings were reinforced in interviews with young people, whose impressions of the music programme were overwhelmingly positive, although there were some negative responses. In terms of valued affordances, the music programme offered *a new experience; purposeful activity and use of time; enjoyment; a meaningful learning experience; an opportunity not to feel stigmatised or patronised; improved self confidence; a supportive group experience; the opportunity to work with inspiring and creative musicians; pride in personal achievement; opportunity to be creative; and broadened horizons.*

One question was whether the workshops would reinforce criminal attitudes or behaviours through increased exposure to genres associated with violence, misogyny or criminal activity. In fact, participants' music preferences were often more ambiguous than this, and the participatory process tended to invite individuals to consider alternative genres and explore personal experience rather than rehearse stereotypical themes. Hence participants often engaged in a creative and developmental process, exploring new ideas and perspectives on music and its creation. Nevertheless, not all participants could relate to the music programme, some finding it difficult to engage, to learn and to make progress.

Negative comments about the programme tended to cluster around availability of instruments or equipment and shortage of time. Some individuals simply found it difficult to concentrate, to see the purpose of the activities or had expectations that could not be met by the programme.

Many participants indicated a desire to continue to participate in music, inspired by the project. For most, this meant attending music events in the future (concerts or festivals), though a number expressed a desire to continue learning an instrument, singing or performing. A small number of male participants seemed to have forged a strong musical identity and wanted to become professional musicians. However, some also identified barriers to developing their music skills further in the future, such as lack of resources, lack of training opportunities, lack of confidence, the presence of distractions, the role of media representations of the pop industry and the potential insecurity of a music career.

Music aspirations were also explored in the five follow-up interviews with four male and one female participant, undertaken three to four months after the programme had finished. Four of the interviews took place in custodial settings with participants who were serving relatively long sentences. Difficulties accessing or tracing individuals who had been released from custody meant it was not possible to explore if any had made progress in terms of music education or career; neither was it possible to follow-up their progress with regard to resettlement or reduced re-offending. Nevertheless, these five interviewees were able to reflect positively upon the music programmes and were evidently strongly attached to their CDs. They talked about having increased interest in music, those in custody perceiving listening to music and participating in music education as an important coping mechanism and emotional outlet. On the other hand, these individuals revealed ongoing barriers associated with custody – emotional, social and

environmental – which included boredom, stressful family relations, bullying, exploitation and negative peer relations, restrictions on their activities, and inadequate access to music education. When speaking about their aspirations, individuals’ revealed their fears of becoming involved in crime or drugs, and of having no money and poor employment prospects. None were keen to return to custody in the future.

QUANTITATIVE FEASIBILITY STUDY

A feasibility study was undertaken using four quantitative scoring tools, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12); The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS); The CORE-OM (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation Outcome Measure); and the Social Inclusion Score (SIS). These assessments of health, wellbeing, mental health and social inclusion have been well-validated for the general adult (16+) population. Assessment was undertaken of the feasibility and appropriateness of these scores for measuring outcomes with this population of potentially vulnerable and volatile young people. Scores were collected at three points: one week pre-programme, immediately post-programme (six weeks), and three to four months post-programme. 104 participants completed the baseline questionnaire (pre-programme). Attendance across each programme was significantly impaired, with participants attending on average three out of six workshops, with significant reductions in post-programme and three-to-four month follow-up scores (n=38 and n=25, respectively). Therefore, any attempt to analyse trends across the three time points would have been statistically unreliable, so statistical analysis of these data was not undertaken. However, descriptive analysis was undertaken of the pre-programme baseline scores, which suggests that participants had ‘healthy’ level of mental wellbeing consistent with the general population. It should be noted, though, that the GHQ-12 and WEMWBS have not been validated for youth justice populations, so comparisons with the national population mean may provide a false indication of participants’ overall mental health. We expected participants to indicate a slightly poorer state of mental wellbeing, given their circumstances, and this was borne out by the qualitative research. This led us to question further the appropriateness of these tools and the validity of the outcomes.

This evaluation of feasibility provides important insight into the use of quantitative research with youth justice populations that may help inform future studies. In terms of content, wording and interpretation, most participants found completion of the questionnaires relatively unproblematic, requesting minimal assistance – usually clarification of particular words or terminology. Average completion time for the all the scores was twenty minutes. In terms of age appropriateness, older participants within YOI and juvenile custody sites did not encounter difficulties with the questions. However, the decision was made to withdraw the CORE-OM within the SCHs, as some participants appeared unsettled by the negative questions about suicidal ideation, self-harm and violence; it

was also noted, within the YOI and juvenile units, that some participants had missed out these questions, found them confusing or perceived them as amusing. It was therefore considered inappropriate to continue using the CORE-OM with younger participants. The CORE-YP was introduced in 2011, and was therefore too late to introduce to this study.

CONCLUSIONS

The Musical Pathways project yielded interesting and compelling data on the values, attitudes, views and behaviours of young people in justice settings, particularly in relation to participatory music programming and young people's identification with music and education. The research revealed the effects of group dynamics, institutional systems, behavioural factors and population transience on programme delivery within justice settings. High levels of instability and transience of the population impacted detrimentally on programme attendance and participation, also limiting what could be drawn from the quantitative data. However, while the latter provide no significant outcomes with regard to health, wellbeing or social inclusion, the qualitative research revealed significant affordances offered by music making for young people, and illustrated programme and contextual factors necessary for these affordances to be realised.

Creative music making has the potential to engage 'hard to reach' young people, delivering positive learning experiences and enabling them to forge new identities. Active engagement in arts programmes of this kind can deliver life-changing benefits for some individuals; certainly, for the majority of participants involved in this study, the experience helped them to cope with difficult circumstances, including custody, and to consider how music could help them look positively towards the future. Participatory music programmes can provide opportunities for young people to engage alternative skills and competencies that are not routinely afforded them via conventional education and training programmes. Moreover, music provides a medium that enables young people to engage their life experiences in creative ways, to identify positively with music, to draw on knowledge and experiences, and to engage with their peer group. Professional musicians trained to work with such groups bring skills and experience that enable them to garner respect from young people, particularly groups that are normally difficult to engage with and that present with challenging attitudes and behaviours. This research suggests that music programmes that take this approach are a major asset to youth justice organisations, especially since they are located outside the system and can command respect and credibility from young people.

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