

The effectiveness of VCS youth counselling services and their role within the mental health system

A summary of findings

November 2020

This briefing is for managers and practitioners working in Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Counselling Services, and commissioners and decisionmakers involved in the delivery of mental health services for young people aged 0-25 who want to

know more about the outcomes of Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) and their role within the mental health system.

Key findings

Our study found that community-based Youth Information Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) have comparable clinical outcomes to statutory and school-based services, whilst achieving higher rates of satisfaction amongst young people. We found that, compared with statutory services, YIACS are supporting young people experiencing higher levels of distress, and are reaching more marginalised and otherwise underserved young people (such as BAME young people).

Background

This briefing gives an overview of key findings from the first systematic evaluation of youth counselling services in England. This research was carried out by Youth Access, Roehampton University and the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists, and looked at the outcomes and quality of counselling offered by VCS services, and the characteristics and needs of the young people (aged 11-25) they support. (You can find a report of the full findings [here](#).)

VCS services provide mental health support to young people aged 0-25 outside of statutory and school settings. VCS counsellors typically work with young people on a weekly basis, using a person-centred or humanistic approach, providing high quality support to young people otherwise at risk of being left behind by mainstream services. In recent years VCS services have reported more young people coming to them for support as the numbers of those experiencing complex challenges grows, and statutory provision struggles to meet rising demand.

Research methods

This research took place across nine Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) in England between 2014 and 2016. A total of 2,144 young peo-

ple (aged 11-25) were referred for counselling over the course of the study and completed the Young Person's Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (YP-CORE) or the CORE-10 at each counselling session. These tools measure the level of psychological distress experienced by young people aged between 11 and 16 (YP-CORE) and 17 and over (CORE-10). We did a statistical analysis to compare the YP-CORE/CORE-10 scores at the beginning and end of the counselling sessions to see if there was any change in young people's mental health over this time.

We used a measure called the Current View Tool to record information about the challenges a young person might be experiencing in their daily life (such as being a looked after young person, or challenges with education or employment). We also collected information about young people's experiences of the support they received using the Experience of Service Questionnaire (ESQ).

We compared the data we collected from YIACS with similar data from young people accessing support from statutory Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and school-based counselling services to compare outcomes of these different services and any differences or similarities in the groups of young people being supported by them.

Findings

Outcomes of VCS youth counselling services

We found there was a (statistically) significant reduction in psychological distress after young people had accessed counselling support from YIACS¹. Just over half (52%) of young people completing the CORE-10 showed reliable improvement and approximately one-third (29%) a clinically significant change or 'recovery'². These outcomes are similar to those recorded amongst young people accessing CAMHS, however we also found that young people who were supported by YIACS were experiencing even higher levels of distress and complex life challenges (see below).

Young people's experiences of care

Young people being supported by YIACS said they were very happy with the support they received; a score of 18 on the Experience of Service Questionnaire indicates the highest possible level of satisfaction and young people in this study had an average score of 17.3. Young people accessing YIACS reported higher levels of satisfaction than those accessing CAMHS, for example, 97% young people being supported by YIACS felt it was 'certainly true' that they 'were listened to', compared to 85% of those seen in CAMHS (Wolpert et al., 2016). Similarly, 82% and 81% of clients in our study felt it was 'certainly true' that their appointments were at times and locations that were convenient for them, compared to 62% and 66% of those accessing CAMHS (Wolpert et al., 2016), suggesting that YIACS are more accessible to young people.

What we learnt about young people supported by YIACS counselling services (compared with CAMHS)

We found key differences in the demographic characteristics and life experiences of young people accessing support from YIACS, compared with CAMHS, demonstrating YIACS' unique and important contribution to the systems supporting young people's mental health.

Age: The average age of young people in our study was 20 years, compared to a mean age of 12 in CAMHS (Wolpert et al., 2016), and 14 in school-based counselling (Cooper, 2009) illustrating the key role YIACS play in bridging across the transition from children's to adults' services and helping local systems meet targets for young adults (up to age 25) access to services.

Gender: YIACS were supporting higher numbers of young women; over two thirds (65%) of the young people in our study were female, compared to 52% in CAMHS (Wolpert et al., 2016)

Ethnicity: The proportion of young people from Black and Minority ethnic backgrounds supported by YIACS was 31%, compared to 18% in CAMHS (Wolpert et al., 2016), and just 3% in school-based counselling (Cooper, 2009), suggesting that VCS services are better able to meet the needs of BME young people, who are often under-represented in talking therapies.

Mental health: Young people seeking support from YIACS were experiencing very high levels of psychological distress; a score of around 21 on both CORE-10 and YP-CORE, classified as being 'moderately severe'. The most common mental health challenges young people sought support for was anxiety (68%), followed by depression/low mood (61%). These were much higher than seen in CAMHS (49% and 50%) and school-based counselling

(9% and 10% respectively, Wolpert et al., 2016; Cooper, 2009).

Life challenges: Young people accessing YIACS most often needed help with difficulties in family relationships (52%), and with peers (50%). Other challenges they experienced included school, work, or training issues (53%), home issues (46%), challenges with their parent's health (23%), experience of abuse/neglect (11%), contact with the Youth Justice System (10%), and living in financial difficulty (9%). Over a fifth (23%) of young people were experiencing attendance difficulties in education, employment, and training. A much higher proportion of young people accessing YIACS had been in contact with the Youth Justice System compared to those seen in CAMHS (10% vs 2%,). Conversely, young people seen in CAMHS were more likely to experience issues at home (59% vs 46%), and attendance difficulties (31% vs 23%) in education employment, and training than those accessing YIACS (Wolpert et al., 2016).

Conclusions

We found key differences in the characteristics and experiences of young people accessing support from YIACS, compared to statutory and school-based services, revealing the unique and important role YIACS play in local mental health provision for young people. In contrast to the frequently held view that VCS services provide low-level support for minor mental health issues, this study demonstrates that, despite a challenging financial climate, community-based YIACS are offering comparable clinical outcomes to statutory and school-based services, while achieving higher rates of client satisfaction and reaching more marginalised, highly distressed and otherwise underserved client groups.

References

- Duncan, C., Rayment, B., Kenrick, J and Cooper, M (2018) Counselling for young people and young adults in the voluntary and community sector: An overview of the demographic profile of clients and outcomes. Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12206>
- Wolpert, M., Jacob, J., Napoleone, E., Whale, A., Calderon, A., & Edbrooke-Childs, J. (2016). Child and parent-reported outcomes and experience from child and young people's mental health services 2011–2015. London, UK: CAMHS Press.