

A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION OF THE GLASGOW COMMUNITY INITIATIVE TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

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Summary: The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) was developed to address the long-standing problem of youth-related gang violence in Glasgow through a multi-agency community-centred approach. A fundamental aspect of the initiative is the allocation of a mentor to those clients most in need of support. The current project involves a study of the perceptions, experiences and recommendations of mentors and clients through a series of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Analysis of the transcripts identified 13 themes, including: *Motivation to be a mentor, background and training role of mentors, role of peer mentors, disciplinary strategies, disclosure of personal information, time spent with clients, qualities of a mentor, impact of mentors, approaches to mentoring, dealing with client set-backs, gender of mentors, and time to allocation.* While there was general agreement by those represented in the study that mentoring is an important aspect of CIRV, there are a number of areas that could be further refined. In particular, it was noted that there should be greater clarity around the role of the mentors, and the provision of guidance and support through mentor meetings would enable the sharing of best practice.

INTRODUCTION

Youth, gang-related violence is a long-standing problem in Glasgow. In an attempt to address this problem the National Violence Reduction Unit implemented the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) in 2008. This £5 million multi-agency, community-centred initiative brings together health, education, social work, criminal justice, housing, employment, and community and safety services in a novel, enlightened collaborative partnership. CIRV operates a three pronged approach to the prevention of future violence: enforcement by the criminal justice system, the provision of programmes and services to enable the youths to leave their violent lifestyle, and the moral voice of the community delivering the message that “the violence must stop”. One particular aspect of the provision of programmes and services is mentoring, whereby those clients most at need are allocated a mentor who has the following brief:

- Making a connection – starting to build trust and credibility
- Assisting the young person in the process of identifying goals
- Monitoring and evaluating progress towards their goals
- Celebrating achievements/managing endings to provide support

At the time of the project, CIRV had 34 available mentors (with equal numbers of males and females), 14 of whom have clients allocated to them. Of the approximately 380 young people who were engaged with CIRV at the time, 33 in Glasgow’s East End and 21 in the North of the City had had a mentor. The mentors were recruited from across the private, public and voluntary sectors, including full-time key workers, peer mentors (ex-offenders employed by CIRV) as well as individuals recruited from partner agencies (Glasgow Housing Association or Glasgow Community and Safety Services).

As a means of evaluating the mentoring service to ensure it is most effectively meeting the needs of the client group, the project studied the perceptions, experiences and any recommendations of a sample of nine mentors (two key workers, three peer mentors and four agency mentors) and eight clients. A series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken, with clients also completing a questionnaire. All interviews were transcribed.

MAJOR FINDINGS TO DATE

Analysis of the transcripts identified 13 themes each of which will be briefly described in turn.

Motivation to become a mentor

The motivation to become a mentor was driven largely by having grown-up in Glasgow. Peer mentors were also motivated by a desire to “give something back”.

“I was part of it myself when I was a kid, and I totally understand some of these young boys...I think it makes a real difference to know that someone understands you and is out there to try and help you”

Mentors recruited from partner agencies were introduced to CIRV through their superiors, and considered it an add-on to their existing job dealing with antisocial behaviour. This kind of recruitment was highlighted as warranting further consideration.

“I think you have to want to do it...if you're told to do it, you've probably got absolutely zero interest in doing it to the best of your ability”

Background and Training

The majority of mentors had a professional background dealing with young people and antisocial behaviour, and many felt it was a “*natural progression*”. The general feeling was that mentors relied more on their past experience, skills and training to perform their role, as opposed to training provided by CIRV. However, most mentors had completed a conflict resolution course, and on the whole, it was felt to be beneficial.

“deal with some of these conflict issues with this young person before we can move on”

However, some expressed a wish for training focused more specifically on mentoring,

“Basically, the stuff that I found irrelevant was the stuff to do with gangs and gang cultures.... I find that irrelevant to a young person whose mum and dad are on alcohol and they're embarrassed by that, and they're just crying out for help all the time”.

It may be beneficial to provide follow-up training and meetings for mentors, to allow for communication, group learning and sharing of experiences.

Role of mentors

Some mentors, particularly those recruited from external agencies, were unclear about their role. Some felt it was their role was “*to get him a job*”, while others felt their main focus should be addressing the client's personal problems, as “*only when you've worked through the problems can you move forward*”,

One suggestion was that mentors should attend the CIRV self-referral session as a means of fully explaining the context of the project and significance of the role: “*made everything crystal clear about what I was doing*”

In the future, the initial briefing should more clearly describe the role and attendance at the self-referral session should be encouraged.

From the perspective of the CIRV clients, the role of their mentor seemed to change after the initial meeting. Some of the boys had initially been apprehensive and unsure of what to expect, and some simply disillusioned and cynical before meeting their mentor.

“I thought it was somebody just trying to tell you what to do and all that, but it's just like somebody else to talk to”

The role of peer mentors

The effectiveness of peer mentors seemed to divide opinion. Those dismissive of/against the idea explained that in their opinion, “*nobody near they boys' peer group would work the same*”, and emphasised the importance of life experience and life skills. Some were also concerned about an “*alpha male*” situation arising and others about the peer mentor's own personal problems and lack of confidence affecting their job.

However, some were strongly in favour of peer mentors, highlighting the benefits for the clients, and for the peer mentors themselves.

It's going to allow him to hopefully develop himself, and I think he has the potential to go and do it, and he has a lot to offer. He gets along with these young boys because he has been there, he does know it, he knows the bad side of it.

Peer mentors felt they had a lot to offer with their unique perspective

“I think it's being able to relate to them at their level. Because when anybody ever tried to help me, I never really connected with them, because I thought, they don't understand, they don't know”

Those clients who had a peer mentor gave very favourable reviews, and seemed to have had a good experience and trusting relationship. Interestingly though, there was no preference amongst the boys for a peer mentor; a few felt they would respond better to somebody older, and few felt it was very important that their mentor had similar life experiences to them. What was clear was that the boys needed their mentor to be open-minded and understanding of their problems.

Disciplinary strategy

The views on discipline, particularly the use of 2/3 strike approach, were very polarised. Some mentors believed in a “firm hand” and felt that after 2/3 failures to comply, “*what more can you do*”. These mentors were concerned that respect in the relationship would be undermined if they continued to make allowances, and felt it ill-advised to condone that kind of behaviour.

“Disrespect from the start is no way to begin. They’ve got to learn the lesson that you can’t muck people about and still expect to have all the opportunities”

Others noted that given the nature of the clients, their lifestyle and circumstances, and distrust of the “system”, there would inevitably be “*set-backs and mistakes*” and “*genuine stumbling blocks*”, and these mentors felt it was crucial to “go back again and again and again”. These mentors strongly believed that it was a “*certain type of person that can do this mentoring role*”, and that those “*so far removed from the backgrounds that these guys are coming from*”, or who have “*low tolerance*”, would have significant difficulties engaging with clients. These mentors felt that real behavioural change could come only from a trusting relationship.

“You’ve got to just keep chipping away... you might get told where to go one time, but you just go back up just kind of chipping away at it, till eventually you’ve gained their trust and you’ve got the relationship there.”

Further guidance on the preferred approach should be offered to the mentors to ensure that every client has similar experiences and opportunities.

Disclosure of personal information.

Another issue that divided the opinions of some mentors was the disclosure of personal information to their clients. Some chose to refer to their background using “*anecdotes*” in order to help the client feel they can relate to them, and understand what they are going through. Others felt strongly about not sharing their own personal life with clients: “*something I try to keep as far away as possible from them in all honesty*”. Concern was also expressed that clients could “*use it as a weapon*”, especially if the mentor became “*too emotionally involved*”.

Overall, the mentors recognised that they had control over what information was shared, and that they should share as much as they felt comfortable with “*within terms of security*”. However, group meetings or training could help inform mentors’ perspectives on when, how and how much to share, and situations in which it might be beneficial or detrimental to the relationship.

Time spent with clients

An issue that most mentors felt strongly about was the amount of time given to their client and to their mentoring role. Agency mentors were concerned that the demands of their job did not leave enough time to spend with their client which they acknowledged was necessary to build a strong relationship. One agency mentor also commented that he felt guidance was “*a bit cloudy*” in terms of “*what time scale you’re meant to ... how many times you’re expected to see them and how far you go with them*”. With regards to time commitments, other individuals felt quite strongly that “*I don’t think anybody should be involved in it at all if they can’t commit*”,

“...if a boy phoned up today and said I need to speak to you, I could go out this afternoon. For others, they’d have to say sorry, I’m on duty, this that and the next thing, and it could be a week before they get to see somebody...”

Qualities of mentors

Having a mentor that was easy to talk to was mentioned frequently by clients as an important quality: “*as if you were talking to a pal*” and “*see a bit from your point of view*”.

Although “*telling us what to do*” was rarely appreciated, being able to give good advice and guidance was valued. Listening and not judging, as well as being reliable and easy going were also qualities named by some clients as being important. These qualities were also highlighted by the mentors, despite some mentors reporting observing others adopting an overly official/formal approach

A few of the mentors talk about working very hard on first impressions, and getting the tone right.

“young people can be very judgmental... They’ve had a lot of bad experiences as well, and they can see you as the ‘system’, the ‘institution’”.

It is, however, a “*judgement call*” as although most of the boys respond well to the mentor “*sounding like one of the boys*”, it is acknowledged that that approach “*will not match everybody*”. Thus, further guidance on the issue of whether the mentor should act as a figure of authority, or an advocate, would avoid conflict in role perception, which has been identified as a contributory factor in the success of mentoring programmes.

Impact of mentors

Most of the clients reported that the mentors helped with their behaviour and attitude.

“See everything different now. Instead of thinking stupid things, ken daft things and that, you take a step back and think, what’s the point in doing something like that? It doesn’t make any sense anymore.”

Mentors also helped with issues around employment, education, and alternative hobbies/activities, as well as more general skills such as time management and organisation. Moreover, most clients felt that they could speak to their mentor about more personal issues. However, only a few clients felt that their mentor should be/is a positive role model. This is interesting, as the concept of a role model is widely considered to be a key element of mentoring. Additionally, with respect to whether or not their mentor should or does keep them out of trouble, there was a range of responses; some felt that mentors should, or do have that influence, while some boys disagreed and others were neutral. In general, clients reported a positive experience with their mentor, and most agreed that having a mentor had made a positive impact on their success on the CIRV programme.

Approaches to mentoring

Every mentor felt that it was important to help clients set personal goals, and reinforce positive behaviour. One mentor remarked that people are “*always quick to tell kids off when they do something wrong*”, and therefore he always makes an effort to “*put a lot of emphasis on recognizing even the tiniest step in the right direction and affirming them for it*”. Many mentors also highlighted the importance of interacting with their client’s family in building a successful mentoring relationship. It was noted that this enabled a better understanding of the client: “*piecing together the jigsaw puzzle*” of the client’s life. The issue of working with a client’s family is an issue that could be covered in mentor training or meetings, in order to discuss possible benefits and disbenefits.

Dealing with client set-backs

A major challenge mentioned by most of the mentors was dealing with things going wrong for their client.

“Any time one of the boys mess up and maybe get caught with knives, that always sets me back”

Mentors’ experiences of when a client failed to engage, missed an opportunity, or “*fell off the path*”, sometimes caused considerable upset, frustration and distress. Some mentors felt they had become “*cynical*” over time. The introduction of mentor (support) meetings could help to minimise these concerns, and provide increased guidance and support to help deal with such challenges.

Gender of mentors

The issue of gender and its impact on mentoring was raised. A male mentor explained that his client had been allocated to him, as opposed to a female on his team, because the particular offence had been of a sexual nature. This idea of matching on the basis of gender was also mentioned by a mentor in terms of providing a “*male role model*”. One female key worker recalled a gender-related issue; during group work, one boy’s behaviour was “*really quite defensive*” whenever she engaged with him in any way. She observed, however, that he seemed “*more chatty, more open*” with a male colleague, and the case was taken over by the male mentor. In general, however, clients did not have a preference with regards the gender of a mentor.

Time to allocation

A major point raised by mentors was the time it took to be allocated a client: “*quite a gap between name going down as a mentor and getting a referral*” with some mentors confessing that they “*can’t quite remember what was said about the remit*”.

A similar issue arose with regard to the time from a client engaging with CIRV and being allocated a mentor, which could take many months - “*quite a wait, but worth it in the end*”.

One suggestion to establish early contact, involved the mentor attending the initial engagement house visit along with an engagement officer rather than the current practice of two engagement officers

“all mentors should go out with a member of staff who’s been more involved”

FUTURE WORK

The current study forms part of an on-going evaluation of CIRV. As a result of some of the issues identified here, changes may be made to the delivery of the mentoring service. It will be necessary to ensure that this re-vamped service continues to meet the needs of the client group. Thus, the questionnaire developed and refined during the project will provide a time-efficient way to evaluate this service from the perspective of the clients as part of the ongoing evaluation strategy.

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

CIRV.(2009). *First year report*. Glasgow: Violence Reduction Unit.

CIRV.(2010). *Third quarter progress report*. Glasgow: Violence Reduction Unit.